Crewmeru Hardcore

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by disparity

Summary

Six friends scattered across the U.S. meet playing Genshin Impact, a popular MMORPG highly rated for its anime-style graphics, engaging quest design, and challenging endgame content. The first time they all meet up in person is at an anime convention, and it's there that they learn a very important lesson: you should never trust anyone you meet over the internet.

Notes

Hi, welcome. I should probably warn you that this fic is a hot mess, and so is everyone in it. The whole idea is that Genshin is an MMORPG that the Sumeru boys play together. Some Genshin characters are still in the game, but the main cast only exists IRL and are just players. The classes are all from DND 5e but their abilities and mechanics are either made up or from random games. The main MMOs I've played are WOW, ESO, and FFXIV, and I've kind of pulled different shit from all of them to make this imaginary Genshin MMO. I'm going to include some gamer terms in the end notes in case anyone is unfamiliar, so look down there if you're not HARDCORE like me. If I missed anything and you're confused, let me know.

This fic is a little different for me because it's not outlined at all, I have no idea how long it's going to be, and I'm not meticulously editing before I post. I'm just running on vibes here, so it's gonna be a little chaotic. I feel like it works for a fic like this, though. Enjoy!

Also I should add the mental health tags are for Sethos and Scara a bit too. Take care of your mental health guys. GO TO FUCKING THERAPY SETHOS!!!

Chapter 1: I Swear to King Deshret, Who Is More Powerful Than God

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Fuck, fuck you, *no-!"* Kaveh screams as he runs for his life across an otherwise idyllic town square. Oblivious NPCs carry on with their business, vendors hawking their wares as townsfolk stroll leisurely between the stalls. Meanwhile Kaveh is shooting fiery missiles from his staff as he continues to sprint out of reach of his pursuer.

"Stop kiting me, you little bitch," Alhaitham growls, still furiously chasing after him. Every time Kaveh is within range he shoots another crossbow bolt, slowly chipping away at his health.

"Well, stop hitting me!" Kaveh whines. "You're cheating!" He leaps over a wagon, darts into an alley, and starts climbing a building.

Alhaitham huffs into the mic. "You're just trying to buy time until you can resummon your succubus." When he sees that Kaveh is now on the roof, he says, "Fuck! Get down here."

"No! You'll kill me if I go down there."

"Kaveh, get off the roof."

"Nope!" Kaveh leaps to the next building, putting even more distance between them. Alhaitham swears and starts climbing.

"This is not even a duel at this point," he complains. "Just get back here so I can kill you, and we can end this stupid debate."

"Okay, I would just like to point out the fact that artificer is broken in PVP." The duel mechanic will only let him get so far away from Alhaitham before he can't run anymore. He stops and waits for him to catch up. "That's the only reason you're winning. It's not because you're better than me, it's 'cause your class got overtuned last patch."

"You agreed to the terms of the duel," Alhaitham reminds him. "Now get back here and die like a man."

"No, thank you!" Kaveh replies, leaping off the roof. He quickly hides in a nearby church. "I intend to live a very long, full life in the

countryside with my pumpkin patch and eight cats."

"Where the hell did you go?"

Kaveh grins, crouching behind a decorative planter. Alhaitham will never find him in here. "Not telling."

"Kaveh, I swear to God-"

"And I swear to King Deshret, who is more powerful than God."

"Are you in the church?"

"No," Kaveh says quickly. Alhaitham enters through the front door, and Kaveh screams, "Fuck!"

"There you are. Come here, asshole."

"Nonono," Kaveh chants, summoning his fire elemental. "Get him, Mavuika!"

"Come on, Kaveh," Alhaitham taunts. "I won't hurt you." He throws an explosive trap at Kaveh, who gets rooted in place. "Gotcha, motherfucker."

"No!" Kaveh yelps. "Not fair, not fair-" He uses his demon pact to break the CC and steals some of Alhaitham's health to make up for the big hit from the explosion.

"Oh no, you're not getting away." Alhaitham throws an ice trap this time.

Kaveh screams unintelligibly, smashing every button he can to stay alive. He sacrifices his own lifeblood to Deshret, his patron deity, which drops his health by a lot but also does a fuckton of damage to Alhaitham. The idea is that Alhaitham will have to stop and heal himself, buying Kaveh a few precious seconds to escape out the side door. But Alhaitham doesn't do that. Instead, he chooses to fire a hand cannon at Kaveh.

"Nooooo!" Kaveh wails as he dies on the floor. "I can't believe you would kill a man in a church!"

"You are literally a warlock serving an evil rival deity. I don't think anyone will mind."

Kaveh sighs at the flashing red text on his screen: DEFEAT. "Fine, you

win. But again, artificer is OP-"

"Actually, I'm just superior to you in every way, shape, and form. I'm gonna go request the charter."

Huffing, Kaveh accepts the res prompt and comes back to life. His body lifts off the ground and repositions him on his feet. "I can't believe you didn't even heal yourself."

"Didn't need to," Alhaitham points out. "I knew you wouldn't kill me, 'cause you're trash."

Kaveh scoffs. "Let's not forget that I topped your ass last week."

Alhaitham sighs heavily. "Kaveh, this is exactly why you got kicked out of the guild: you just can't help making everything sound as gay as possible."

"Well, I *am* gay!" Kaveh protests. "That's not my fault!"

"You do it on purpose."

Kaveh crosses his arms and glares at his computer screen. "I am allowed to be gay in whatever way I choose. This is America. It's my constitutional right."

"Oh, yeah? Which amendment is that?"

"Sixty-ninth."

Heaving another deep sigh, Alhaitham says, "I don't know why I chose to drag myself down with you."

Kaveh grins. He repositions his hands back to the keyboard and mouse, directing his character to leave the church and head back over to the civil affairs office. "It was actually very chivalrous of you to defend my honor like that. Gave me goosebumps."

"Yeah, well…" Alhaitham trails off awkwardly. "He really shouldn't have said that to you. I mean, you were being super obnoxious, but still."

Kaveh lets out a dramatic sigh. "It's fine. The tank's little girlfriend was holding us back, anyway. We'll be much better off starting our own guild."

"I got the charter," says Alhaitham. "We need three signatures."

"Send it to me and then offer, like, 500 Mora in chat for sigs and kick them immediately after."

"I know what I'm doing," Alhaitham snaps.

Kaveh gets the prompt to sign the guild charter and adds his name. He arrives next to Alhaitham's character in the office. Alhaitham is one of those people who takes glamours very seriously. His outfit has been meticulously crafted from various armor pieces that are notoriously difficult to obtain. Kaveh has suffered through so many painful content runs just to help Alhaitham mean mug everybody with his spiky black armor and glowing eyes.

Meanwhile, Kaveh stands next to him wearing nothing but a leopard-print thong and a dog collar. There are two types of gamers in this world.

They continue to chat over the Discord call while Alhaitham requests the signatures. They get one pretty quickly, but the other takes a few minutes.

"Hah," Alhaitham huffs over the mic. "This guy's asking if we're a social guild."

Kaveh snorts. "Tell him yes, but we still don't want his ass."

Alhaitham's quiet for a moment. And then, "He says he parsed 100 on the chess boss."

"What class?"

"Sorcerer."

"Ehh… Maybe. Ask him why he doesn't have a guild already if he's that good." Alhaitham types the question, then scoffs. "What'd he say?" Kaveh asks.

"It's a girl, apparently. She says all the guys were thirsting after her in voice chat, and it got weird."

Kaveh chuckles in disbelief. "Dude, no way. That's a porn bot. She'll join the Discord and then plug her OnlyFans."

"She invited me to a party."

"Alhaitham, come on, you are *not* this stupid," says Kaveh, shaking his head at his monitor.

"If she gets a good parse, she's in," Alhaitham insists stubbornly.

Kaveh lets out a long, drawn-out sigh. "You dumb, horny motherfucker."

"Teleport to my house."

"No! I refuse to take any part in this."

"Dude, she's a catgirl."

"Alhaitham, stoooop!"

"She's cute."

"It's literally a porn bot!"

"We'll see."

A few minutes later, Alhaitham insists the girl did 700k DPS on the dummy. Kaveh refuses to believe it until he teleports to the house and sees it for himself.

"Okay, that's without mechanics, though," Kaveh points out. "That doesn't mean she's good."

"I think she's legit."

"That's because you're thinking with your dick," he says irritably. Knowing he can't change Alhaitham's mind, he throws up his hands and says, "Fine! Invite her. But the second she posts titties in the Discord, I'm banning her."

"It's a woman's right to post her tits online," Alhaitham insists. "Is this or is this not a free country? There, got her sig. Gonna go turn it in."

"Dumb slut," Kaveh sing-songs.

"Don't slut-shame our guildmates."

"I was talking about you," he says flatly.

Alhaitham turns in the charter, and thus, their new guild is born. The <Crewmeru> tag appears next to both of their character names. Kaveh's the one that came up with it. Sumeru is an older region, but it's the best one by far. Those were the true golden days of Genshin.

A lot more content has come out since then, and the new stuff is pretty good. It's attracted a lot of new players, though, which isn't technically a bad thing. It just means that trying to pug a raid right now is torture. They need a steady group to have any kind of chance at clearing endgame content on a regular basis. A new patch is dropping next week, and they need to be ready.

Kaveh and Alhaitham both take this game pretty seriously. For Alhaitham, it's because he's been playing since the beta and literally has no life. For Kaveh, it's a little more nuanced. Mostly he likes the quirky characters and the fun quest design, and he's just really invested in the lore of the game. And… well, okay, he started playing it when he was trying to get sober.

Kaveh did not make the wisest decisions in his twenties. Drinking, drugs, anonymous sex—yeah, it was kind of a mess. But Kaveh's turned his life around now. He cleaned himself up, went back to college, and became an architect. He's actually doing pretty well as a reasonably attractive thirty-two-year-old with his own apartment in southern California (only a thirty-minute drive from Disneyland). He may or may not be in debt up to his ears, but it's fine. He'll pay it off. Someday. As long as he keeps working hard and doesn't fall back into old habits.

So yeah, the game did start out as a distraction. That was back when Sumeru first released, and Kaveh just kind of… fell in love with it. It's his happy place. And he's actually really fucking good at the game, constantly topping the DPS charts on warlock. He is admittedly kind of shit at PVP, which is why he lost that duel with Alhaitham where they decided who got to be the official guildmaster. It will be a *joint* venture, though. They're co-guildmasters. Just because Alhaitham's name is at the top doesn't mean he's more in charge. Kaveh is just as important. And it was his idea, anyway!

The girl joins the Discord server, and Kaveh sighs. "Here we fucking go."

Alhaitham just leaves the call to join the server voice chat. Kaveh follows, popping in with a somewhat annoyed, "Hello."

"Hey. I'm Scara," says their new member. She does sound like an actual girl. Kaveh's still suspicious.

"Kaveh," he introduces himself. "How long have you been playing sorc?"

"Since Inazuma, but I took a break for a little while."

Kaveh's eyebrows lift. That's longer than him, technically. "Oh. Nice."

"Yeah, I just like throwing lightning at everything."

"Valid," says Kaveh.

"Your house is nice, by the way. Al… haitham? Am I saying that right?"

"Yeah, you got it," says Alhaitham. "Kaveh decorated the house."

"Oh. Cool."

"Yep. So." Alhaitham clears his throat. "Anyway. Finding a healer for the static will probably be the hardest part. I got a lead on tank, but I don't know if he'll leave his current guild."

"Then it's just one more DPS," says Scara. "That shouldn't be too hard. You play artificer ranged or melee?"

"It's a melee build," says Alhaitham.

Scara hums. "That's top meta right now."

"I can still beat him on warlock," Kaveh chimes in.

"Really?"

"I do more than you sometimes," Alhaitham insists.

"Yeah, well," says Kaveh airily. "I'm topping a lot more than you are these days, babe. How's it feel to be under me? Good, right?"

There's a pause. "Are you two a couple?" asks Scara.

"No," Alhaitham says quickly.

"Fuck no," Kaveh adds. "I have way better taste than this tool."

"Well, I wouldn't fuck you if you were the last warm hole on the planet."

"Well, I'd sooner shove an entire pineapple up my ass than take your micropenis. So."

There's another moment of silence. "Okay, then," says Scara. "Glad we

cleared that up."

They briefly discuss raid times, although it's pointless to make any solid plans before they have all their members. Scara eventually leaves the voice channel, and Alhaitham and Kaveh are quiet for a couple seconds.

"So… what exactly is your plan here?" Kaveh asks him. "'Cause you were super fucking awkward in that call."

"Well, if you'd stop flirting with me, maybe I'd have a chance," Alhaitham complains.

"She seems pretty normal, actually. Which means that you don't have a chance in hell."

Alhaitham tsks. "Fuck you."

"You wish." Kaveh lets out a little grunt.

"Shut up. I'll start recruiting tomorrow. Will you be on?"

"Where else would I be?"

"Okay, see you."

"Night."

Kaveh logs off, sighing as he leans back in his chair. He's never going to get anywhere with Alhaitham, and he knows that. It's his own damn fault for falling for a straight guy. But is it so wrong to hope? Sure, they argue all the time, but they have *chemistry*. God, if only his extremely hot and unavailable online crush was into guys.

Whatever. He lives on the other side of the country, anyway. It would never work between them. But that's not going to stop Kaveh from dreaming about him tonight.

***

"Hey."

"Hey, baby," Scara purrs. "What are you up to?"

"Just waiting for you."

He chuckles throatily. "Well, here I am. What are you gonna do to

me?"

"I'm gonna hold you down and use you like the whore you are."

"Mmm. Is that a threat or a promise?"

Honestly, Scara is lucky his neighbors are so obnoxious. It means that when he's moaning at some random dude over a Discord call they can't say shit about it. Those party girls are over there blasting Sabrina Carpenter when they finally get home from clubbing at 4am, so they can deal with Scara having questionable phone sex at weird hours.

Things didn't start out this way. Scara started playing Genshin in college as a way to de-stress. It didn't exactly work, considering he dropped out and had to move back into his mom's basement. For awhile Genshin was the only thing that got him out of bed. Eventually his mom got sick of his depressive episode and kicked him out, and he was homeless for a bit. That sucked. But he managed to get a job stocking shelves at a Walmart in the ungodly hours of the morning, and eventually, he got back on his feet.

When he started playing Genshin again, he rolled a new character. A catgirl. He just thought it would be funny. He wore slutty outfits and made suggestive comments in chat. And then he started getting random DMs from guys who wanted to RP with him. He ignored them at first. Then someone offered him a ridiculous sum of Mora for a thirty minute session, and… well. The rest is history.

He has several regular clients now. They pay him either in Mora or primogems, the in-game currency you use to buy things from the shop. Then Scara sells it back through a third-party site, which technically violates the TOS, but he's very careful. He knows he'd be seriously fucked if he ever got caught and banned because Genshin ERP is now his main source of income.

And it relies on him being a girl. Which he is not. But he's gotten pretty good at the girl voice, actually. It's maybe a little husky for a girl, but it's convincing enough.

The thing is, Scara doesn't just play the game as a job. He actually likes it a lot, and he's consistently in the top 1% of sorcerers on his server. So he's pretty fucking good at it. The problem is, he can't stop using the girl voice. He's thought about just using his normal voice for raids, but he's terrified of being found out. He could lose everything. He can't risk it.

So yeah, Scara has kind of dug himself into a hole here. A hole where he has to pretend to be a girl in order to keep the roof over his head and food on the table. It's all gotten a little messy.

But hey, the guys in this new guild seem alright. Granted, he thought that about the last guild too, and that assumption turned out to be disgustingly incorrect. He sighs to himself as he vendors his junk to clear some inventory space. All he can do is keep trying. He really needs this gear from the new raid to stay competitive.

A message pops up on his Discord.

Alhaitham: Hey, I invited our new tank. Come say hi if you want

Scara purses his lips. He's not sure he should get all buddy-buddy with these guys. The more comfortable they get with him, the more likely they are to test his boundaries. But… he doesn't really have any friends IRL, and that gets kind of lonely. He bites his lower lip and clicks on the voice channel.

Everyone says hello. "Hey, I'm Scara," he introduces himself.

"My name's Big Chungus," says the new guy in a voice that's shockingly deep. It instantly turns Scara on a little bit. "You can call me Big or Chungus."

"How about we call you by your actual name, dumbass?" says Alhaitham.

Big Chungus sighs dramatically. "But that's not as funny," he complains.

"This is Cyno," Alhaitham introduces him. "He tells terrible jokes, but he's from one of the top raiding guilds on the server, so he is actually good."

"Why'd you leave?" Scara asks him.

"I don't know. Change of pace? I kind of just want something more chill. Those guys are top tier, but they've got massive egos, and it's exhausting to deal with all the time."

Kaveh interjects, "So you're telling me the guy named 'Big Chungus' *doesn't* have a massive ego?"

"Nah, man," Cyno laughs, a deep rumble that makes Scara bite his

lower lip. "It's just a joke name. Hey, you're still looking for another DPS, right?"

"Yeah," says Alhaitham. "You got somebody?"

"My cousin started playing this expansion," says Cyno. "He hasn't raided before, but he's been gaming since the cradle, so he's pretty good."

"I don't know about inviting a guy with no experience," Kaveh says skeptically.

"Aww, come on. He's a really nice guy, and he learns fast. He's got all the gear, he's just nervous about getting started. Help a brother out. Be a good Samaritan. Or Sumeritan. Or whatever."

"Honestly, I feel like the three of us could carry him pretty comfortably through the early tiers," Scara points out. "Everybody has to start somewhere."

"What does he play?" Alhaitham asks.

"Bard," Cyno answers. "It's a support-heavy build, but he does plenty of personal DPS."

"Fuck, that would synergize really well with our team." Alhaitham sighs. "Kaveh, what do you think?"

Kaveh hums. "I mean, a party-wide buffer does sound pretty nice. Even if the damage isn't there, it'll be a lot of utility."

"How is he with mechanics?" Alhaitham asks next.

"He's still learning," Cyno admits. "But he's the kind of guy who doesn't make the same mistake twice. He's smart, and he'll do anything to make sure he's not a burden."

There's a long pause before Alhaitham finally says, "Okay, since he's your cousin. But on a trial basis only. If he can't get up to speed, he gets kicked."

"Yes!" Cyno exclaims. "Dude, he's gonna be so excited. You're not ready for his golden retriever energy."

"Oh, great," says Kaveh. "I regret this already."

"His character name is Dyuevenn Liftbreaux," says Cyno. "I'll put it in

chat."

When Scara sees how it's spelled, he snorts. "Okay, now that's *actually* funny."

"It is pretty great," Cyno agrees.

They keep chatting for awhile. Scara queues up with Cyno for a dungeon they both need. He already made a promise to himself that he wouldn't offer his services to these guys, that he'd try to keep it separate this time. He has more than enough clients already. But at the same time… he does kind of want to hear Cyno's voice say filthy things in his ear.

"Damn, you're burning these guys quick," Cyno remarks as Scara throws out his chain lighting, zapping the entire mob's remaining HP.

"This is my AOE build," says Scara. "It won't do as much damage on the boss, but it's good at nuking trash."

"I'm gonna do a bigger pull this time."

Scara clicks his tongue. "Don't piss off the healer."

"She's keeping up," Cyno points out. "You kill 'em so fast it won't matter."

The praise makes Scara smile a little. He'd like to hear more. Preferably about how gorgeous he is and how good his pussy feels.

It gets a little weird role-playing as a girl sometimes. Scara doesn't have a pussy, and he doesn't want one. For a while there, he wondered if he did actually want to be a woman, but that's not quite right. He wouldn't really be *opposed* to being a woman if it somehow happened, but he's pretty comfortable with his body the way it is. It's just that… well, it's kind of hot to hear a guy calling him a good girl. And he sometimes likes to wear lingerie and watch himself get off in the mirror. It makes him feel pretty.

He's never actually partaken in his feminization kink with a guy. Not in person. He doesn't date a lot, and when he does, it's just random hookups. It's something he'd like to explore more, but he's a little embarrassed about it. He feels like he'd have to actually know a guy for a little while before he'd be comfortable doing that. But he does want to. Someday. Maybe. Or he'll just stay locked up in this shitty apartment having phone sex with guys who think he's a hot e-girl until

he turns old and gray.

Cyno's cousin joins the voice chat as they're fighting the boss.

"Hey, guys!" he says brightly after they all greet him. "Cyno said you have a raid team."

"We're putting one together," says Kaveh. "Think you can handle it?"

"Totally!" he chirps. And then, "Um. I think so, anyway. I'll do my best."

"I'm sure you'll do fine," Scara tells him.

"Oh. Thank you." He suddenly sounds nervous. "Um. What's your name?"

"Scara," he replies.

"Is that your character's name or your real name?"

"Both."

"Oh. It's a nice name."

Scara smirks and says, "Thanks. What's yours?"

"Sethos."

"Hi, Sethos," he says, a little flirty. At this point in his career he can absolutely tell when a guy is simping over him in chat.

Sethos laughs a little and says, "Hi."

"Don't be weird just because there's a girl," Cyno says as they finish off the boss. He moves into the next area, and Scara follows.

"Oh!" Sethos exclaims. "Sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"You didn't," Scara assures him.

"I promise I won't be weird."

"Okay, Sethos. I believe you."

Kaveh cuts in. "Okay, now that we've established that, anyone got any ideas for how we kidnap this healer?"

"All the top guilds are going to be really protective of their healers," Cyno says. "They're in high demand, especially since monk released. Lot of clerics jumped ship."

"What we really need is a druid," says Alhaitham.

Cyno hums and says, "I don't think we can afford to be picky. We'd have to offer something special."

"We can try to nab a crafter," Kaveh suggests. "My house is kitted out with every crafting station and all the buffs. We can make it the guild hall."

"Damn," Scara remarks. "How much actual money did you spend on that?"

"None," he replies proudly. "All from free primos. I've been collecting for years."

"Impressive," says Cyno.

"Why yes, I am." He makes a smug little noise. "I wonder if I could go into the crafting simulator and try to recruit from there."

"You do that," says Alhaitham. "I'm going to park in Nod-Krai and spam chat."

Cyno and Scara finish their dungeon, and then Sethos joins them for the next run. He's actually not bad on bard. His DPS is a little low, but it's steady. Even when he has to dodge, he's still firing. He seems to have a pretty good handle on his rotation.

Alhaitham grunts over the call. "Some asshole is arguing with me in zone chat."

"Did you start it?" Kaveh asks.

"No," Alhaitham replies.

"Liar," Kaveh says confidently. "Ooh, hang on! Someone messaged me. He says, 'Let me see this guild hall and we'll talk.'"

"What class?" Alhaitham demands immediately.

"Druid."

"Kaveh, do not fuck this up."

Kaveh huffs and says, "I got it, I got it."

"This guy cleaves either in front or behind depending on the attack," Scara informs Sethos as they come upon the last boss in the dungeon. "You have to watch the cast bar."

"Or I could just stand on top of you the whole fight," Sethos replies. "I know you'll be in position."

Scara snorts. "I'd like to know you a little better before I let you step on me."

Sethos makes a strangled noise in his throat, and Cyno laughs. "Don't tease him like that," he says. "He's awkward around women."

"Shut up!" Sethos snaps.

"He definitely wants you to step on him, Mommy," Cyno continues.

"Shut *up!"*

"Aww," Scara coos. "Come here, Sethos. I'll cradle you to my bosom while we fight this guy."

"Oh my gosh, stop it," Sethos says desperately. "Let's just kill him."

Scara cackles, but he stops teasing the poor guy. They get through the fight. As they're rolling for loot, Kaveh screams and says, "Ah, okay! He says he wants to meet us first. I'm going to give him access to voice chat. Everyone pretend to be normal for a few minutes."

"I'll try my best," says Cyno. "But no promises."

When the druid joins the voice chat, everyone says hello. He doesn't even say hi back, instead leading with, "Everyone give me your class and tell me why you're not shit in ten seconds or less. Top to bottom, go."

"Warlock," says Kaveh. "Me and the artificer came from Pardis Dhai, and I was top DPS every week except when Alhaitham cheated."

"Why'd you leave?" asks the druid.

"I got kicked for being too gay," Kaveh replies.

"Okay, so that answers my other question about whether or not you're a homophobic piece of shit. Next."

"I'm the artificer," says Alhaitham, "and I don't cheat. I've been top 500 in PVP since the beta, and my hand cannon hits for 1.3 mil."

"Okay, next."

"Sorcerer," says Scara. "I've been playing storm build since 2.0. When the 6.3 nerfs hit, I would queue up for randoms and out-DPS rogues just to piss them off."

"Loyalty's a good trait in a woman. Next."

"Paladin," says Cyno. "I make puns and have a big dick."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. It's huge."

The druid sighs. "I guess that's all you really need to play tank. Okay, last one."

"Oh, me?" Sethos clears his throat and says, "I'm Sethos, and I play bard. I'm still kind of new to Genshin, but I played a lot of marksmanship hunter in WOW-"

"Okay, that's enough," says the druid. "Why's the noob here?"

"He's my cousin," Cyno replies. "He's on a trial run."

"He's actually not bad," Scara chimes in. "Unless there's a hard DPS check on the first tier, we should be fine. His buffs will make up for it."

The druid lets out a long sigh, "Okay, well, I guess that's fine."

"What about you?" Cyno asks him. "Why do you deserve to be on the raid team?"

"Okay, first of all," he says in a sassy tone, "let me just make it clear that I do not need any of you. All I have to do is stand in Nasha Town and say I'm a druid looking for a raiding guild, and I'll have twenty DMs within two seconds. Secondly, I've been playing this game since release. I have leveled every single class. I have done every side quest there is. I know more about the lore of King Deshret than I know about my own mother. I have raided with the top guilds on three different servers, and I am by far the best druid in the entire region."

"Wow," says Cyno, clapping sarcastically. "Hey buddy, if you're so

fucking great at this game, then why don't you have a guild?"

The druid huffs into his microphone. "Because I don't heal idiots. If you get hit by something you weren't supposed to get hit by, I will not bail you out. I will leave you to suffer and die because that's exactly what you deserve."

"Hmm. A healer that doesn't heal," Kaveh drawls. "Kind of sounds like we'd be better off without you."

"Kaveh, what are you doing?" Alhaitham hisses.

He hums again. "I don't know, guys, I think we can do better than this asshole."

"I'm better than literally anyone else you could find in the entire game," the druid says heatedly.

Scara catches on quickly. "How many guilds have you applied to in the last few weeks?" he asks. "The new patch drops on Tuesday. You must be pretty fucking desperate to find a static before the first tier releases."

The druid stutters for a moment. "I'm not."

"Oh, I think you are," says Kaveh smoothly. "I think you're posturing because you know that nobody wants to deal with your shitty attitude. I think all those server transfers were because the top guilds booted you and don't want anything to do with you anymore."

Their prospective healer lets out a growl over the mic.

"Are you cute?" Cyno asks suddenly.

"What?" the druid snaps.

"Are you cute?" he repeats. "We'll let you in if you're cute."

"Yeah, post a selfie in the chat," says Kaveh. "If you're cute, we'll invite you."

"I- That- Mmph." He sighs in defeat. "Okay, okay. I admit I can be kind of toxic, and some people can't handle that."

"Post the pic," says Alhaitham.

He huffs. "I will not."

"Come on," Cyno eggs him on. "You sound cute. I bet you're cute."

"That's completely irrelevant to my level of skill-"

"Post it!" Scara calls out.

"Guys, you're being kind of mean," says Sethos.

"Post the pic!" Alhaitham says again.

"Oh my God, *fine."*

A new image comes through the text chat. Scara clicks over to it and sees… okay, the guy's not really his type, but he'd be lying if he said he wasn't cute as hell. He's got little fox ears and a tail, for fuck's sake.

The voice chat is completely silent for a moment before Cyno says solemnly, "Dude, add him right now."

"Sending," says Kaveh.

The druid accepts the invite. "Wise choice," he says lightly. "I'm Tighnari, by the way. And I meant what I said about not healing any of your dumb asses."

"You'll heal me, though, right?" Cyno asks him. "'Cause I'm your favorite?"

"I will heal you because you're the tank," says Tighnari. "You're not my favorite."

"Am I your favorite?" asks Kaveh.

"You do have a very nice house."

"I have a nice house, too," Alhaitham says.

"Yeah, because *I* decorated it," Kaveh replies. "Why do you want to be his favorite, anyway? You're straight."

"No, I'm not."

The chat is dead silent for a moment before Kaveh screeches, *"What?"*

Chapter End Notes

Parse: A log of how much DPS you did in a fight. If you parse 100

it means you're literally the top of the top for your class in that encounter.

CC: Crowd control. This covers abilities such as traps, stuns, or anything that might inhibit movement.

Pug: Stands for pick-up group. It just means you're playing with randoms instead of your friends or your guild.

PVP: Player-vs-player. This is a mode where you fight other players instead of monsters (which would be PVE or player-vs-enemy).

Static: A group you consistently do endgame content with. You can also just call it a raid team.

RP (ERP): Role-play or erotic role-play. Usually you just pretend to be your character and get up to shenanigans. Potentially dirty ones.

Chapter 2: He's Not Fucking Gay, He's Normal!

Chapter Notes

> Here we gooo, chapter two! I don't have any definitions for you because I feel like it's all explained in the text this time. Also just so you know, I play healer in MMOs, so everything Tighnari says here comes from my own personal inner rage demon which is constantly spitting fire and hatred. I do actually love when tanks pull the whole room, though, 'cause I live on the edge.
>
> We finally get into the Sethoscara next chapter, which I consider to be the main pairing for this fic. There's still plenty of our other dorks, though. Enjoy!

Kaveh: I cannot believe you lied to me for EIGHTEEN MONTHS!!

Alhaitham sighs when he sees the Discord notification pop up on his watch. He's about to go into a meeting, and he can't deal with one of Kaveh's tantrums right now. He switches on DND as he steps into the conference room.

Alhaitham was thrilled when he landed this job. Not because he has any great career ambitions—in fact, it's quite the opposite. Alhaitham doesn't give a fuck about prestige or titles. His only goal with going to college and working his way through entry level, junior, and then senior positions throughout his twenties was to eventually get where he is today: making 300k a year doing absolutely fucking nothing.

It's not like there's zero work involved in being a consultant. He needed those years of schooling and work experience to understand the terminology and phrasing so that he could sound confident when he spouts off random bullshit. Which is honestly how every single one of these meetings goes. Alhaitham stands around and sounds smart and gets paid a lot of money, which he spends on fast cars and random toys he doesn't need because he doesn't really *need* anything anymore. He already has it all.

…Except a wife. Yes, Alhaitham is a rich, successful, 30-year-old bachelor who has never been married. You'd think he'd be drowning in pussy, but you'd be very wrong about that.

At first, it was just that he wasn't really interested in dating. Girls didn't catch his attention unless he found a particularly smart one, but

the thing is, the smart ones know better than to put up with assholes. And Alhaitham is definitely an asshole. He says what he thinks and doesn't lie, not even to be nice. And girls *really* do not like that. He's never been too bothered by it, though. Sex is nice, sure, but there's plenty of other nice things that are way easier to get, so that's what he focuses his attention on.

It wasn't until the ripe old age of twenty-seven that Alhaitham even considered he might be into guys. Looking back there were definitely signs, but nothing glaringly obvious. Alhaitham's always been an ass guy. He appreciates asses no matter who they're attached to. He didn't realize that was unusual until he was drunk at a club one Halloween, squeezing a guy's ass on the dancefloor and thinking, *Hmm, this is kinda gay*.

After that, he panicked a bit. He's not fucking *gay*. He's normal! Eventually, though, he did have to admit to himself that he is into guys. That doesn't mean he's not into girls! He's totally still into girls. Just, also guys.

Now, this is not something Alhaitham goes around announcing to everyone. When he explored his sexuality he did it discreetly, with a shirtless pic on Grindr that didn't show his face. It wasn't until last year, when things with this one guy actually started getting kind of serious, that Alhaitham realized if he had to be married to someone, he'd rather it was a guy. He… did not handle that realization very well.

The thing is, Alhaitham really doesn't want to be gay. All he wants is an easy life. He wants to be normal and boring and unremarkable. He's not like the gay guys you see on TV. He's not like Kaveh. He's not like any of the gay people he's ever seen or heard about. So he *can't* be gay. He just can't.

The meeting ends, and Alhaitham heads back to his office. He checks his email quickly, firing off a couple of replies to make it look like he's working before he glances at his phone again. Kaveh has sent him three more messages.

Kaveh: Like it's one thing if you just didn't tell me. I don't need to know everything about your private life. You want to keep it DL that's fine
Kaveh: But you actively fucking lied to me. Every joke I made you were all "oh I'm not into that" or "not my type" and then come to find out you've been into men this whole time

Kaveh: So explain that to me. Why lie about it? And what made you tell me now, in front of everyone? Was it just to make me look like an idiot?

Alhaitham huffs. He really shouldn't have said anything. It's just, with everything that happened last year, he's been trying really hard to be more accepting of this side of himself. He hasn't told anyone in his life that he's bi yet. That was the first time he ever admitted it out loud, and it was just a spur of the moment thing. He just *said* it. And now Kaveh won't stop giving him shit.

You know what? Kaveh's out of line. Alhaitham did nothing to deserve this. He types back a furious reply.

Alhaitham: You're really going to give me the third degree for coming out to you, and you don't see why I didn't want to do it? You're a real piece of work

Kaveh: I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that

Alhaitham: Then how did you mean it? Cause right now it's coming off like you're pissed at me for not telling you sooner, which you shouldn't be given that you personally know how hard this is to do

Kaveh: Oh shit. Were you not out?

Alhaitham: Not really

Kaveh: Oh my God. Alhaitham I am so sorry
Kaveh: I shouldn't have yelled at you. I was being selfish and stupid and I'm sorry

Alhaitham: I don't need your fucking apology bro

He quickly turns his phone on DND, and his watch notifications are still off. He pretends to be working for the rest of the day, even though he's totally not. When he gets home he boots up his PC and opens the Genshin launcher just like he does every day. His mouse hovers over Discord for a moment before he sighs and clicks on it.

The moment he's online, Kaveh tries to call him. When Alhaitham tabs over he can see he now has a whole wall of messages from him. He sighs and slips on his headset. He hesitates for a moment before accepting the call.

"What?" he grits out.

"I'm sorry," Kaveh says immediately.

"I don't want to hear it."

Kaveh sighs. "I shouldn't have bitten your head off. When you just blurted it out like that, I thought it meant you've been lying to me for a laugh this whole time."

"Well, I wasn't," Alhaitham snaps.

"I know, I know." He's quiet for a minute. "When did you know? How? Was it recent?"

Alhaitham lets out a huff. He closes his eyes and allows the tension to leave his body. This is Kaveh. As annoying as he can be, as much as he gets on Alhaitham's nerves sometimes, they are friends. Close friends. If there's anyone in his life he can talk about this with, it's him.

"I started messing around with guys, like, three years ago," he starts. "I was still kind of in the closet, though."

"Yeah?" Kaveh prompts him to go on.

"And then… last year, there was this one guy. We saw each other a few times, and I wanted to keep seeing him. And that's when I realized this was… real."

Kaveh hums attentively. "But you didn't come out until now?"

"It's nobody else's business," Alhaitham says irritably. "I don't see why I need to make it my entire personality, like you."

Laughing, Kaveh says, "Fair enough. But you are gay, though?"

"No," he insists. "I'm still into girls."

"Okay," says Kaveh simply. "What you like is totally up to you. I'm not judging, just asking." There's a moment's pause. "I'm glad you felt safe enough to tell me. And the guild, too. That was pretty bold of you."

Alhaitham huffs a little. "It just slipped out. You know I'm a shit liar."

"Yeah, you are," Kaveh agrees. "So… you're into guys."

"Yeah."

"Are you into me?"

Alhaitham's heart leaps into his throat. He tries to swallow around it, but he can't.

The thing is, he *is* kind of into Kaveh. That's why he left that toxic guild (and because he didn't want to raid with a homophobe) and that's why he messages him all the time and why they play together for hours on end. And maybe… maybe that's why Alhaitham wanted him to finally know the truth. Because he just couldn't hold it in anymore.

"You don't have to answer that," Kaveh says quickly. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't put you on the spot like that."

"It's fine."

Another quiet moment passes. *Don't be a bitch,* Alhaitham says to himself, but he just can't force the words out.

"The only reason I ask is because, well…" Kaveh lets out a little laugh. "I'm definitely into you."

Alhaitham's whole body starts to tingle and feel light, and it takes him aback for a moment. What the hell is this? What is he feeling right now? He frowns and pays attention to it, trying to identify the feeling. It's not unpleasant, just foreign. His heart is going crazy fast, and he feels kind of… happy?

"But if you're not, that's fine," Kaveh goes on. "I wouldn't want to ruin our friendship over it. Especially since we just started the new guild, and the last thing I want is to make things awkward-"

"Kaveh," Alhaitham interrupts the moment he finds his voice. "Kaveh."

"What?" Kaveh asks. "Alhaitham? Are you okay?"

"I don't know what's happening to me," he responds.

"Okay, explain to me what's going on."

"I just feel…" He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to breathe. "I don't know. My heart's beating really fast."

"Okay, you're a little young for a heart attack. What else?"

"I can't breathe."

"Alhaitham, I can literally hear you breathing."

"I feel weird."

"Like in a bad way?"

"No."

"Alhaitham…" He can hear the smile in Kaveh's voice. "Are you feeling butterflies?"

"No," he snaps. "Kaveh, this is serious."

"Have you never had a crush before?" Kaveh asks.

Alhaitham growls in his throat. "Shut up, that's not it."

"You haven't, have you?"

"Kaveh," he says through his teeth.

"Does it feel tingly?"

"Yes."

"Do you feel happy?"

He grunts. "Kinda, but-"

"How are you a whole ass adult and you don't know what it feels like when your crush says they like you back?"

"You are *not my crush."* He clutches his chest. "I think I'm dying."

Kaveh starts to giggle. "Alhaitham-"

"Stop saying my name," Alhaitham snaps.

"Why, is it making it worse?"

"Yes!"

"Alhaitham," he says again. And then, breathily, *"Alhaitham."*

"Stop it!"

"You're not dying," says Kaveh. "You just *like* me."

Alhaitham closes his eyes and tries to take even breaths. Is that really what this is? Is this what it feels like to have a crush on someone?

Alhaitham has *never* experienced this. He knew he was into Kaveh, but this is… Do people really feel like this all the time? Fuck, how do they stand it?

He knows it's the only logical answer. He's feeling… *butterflies* because Kaveh is into him. God, this is so embarrassing.

"Alhaitham, it's okay," Kaveh says gently.

"Don't talk to me like I'm a fucking child," he snaps. He's not really mad, though. He's too fucking *happy* to be mad.

"Well, most people do experience this as children-"

"Shut *up,"* Alhaitham whines. "Kaveh."

"What?" he asks softly.

"I think…" He takes a deep breath. "I think I'm into you, too."

Kaveh is quiet for a moment before he starts to laugh uproariously. Alhaitham wants to be angry with him right now, but he just can't. Kaveh's into him. Kaveh likes him, and that makes him happy.

Eventually Alhaitham starts to laugh, too, smiling wide and embracing the feeling. They both giggle and snort over the call for several minutes straight. Every time they try to stop, one of them starts it up again.

"I can't believe-" Kaveh pants. He sounds like he's actually laughing so hard he's crying. "I can't believe you thought you were *dying."*

"Shut up," Alhaitham says, clutching his side. "I've never felt anything like that before."

"Really? Maybe you're, like- some kind of ace?"

Alhaitham huffs. "I've had sex."

"Yeah, but were you into it?"

"I mean… it was nice, I guess." He shrugs. "It feels good."

"But you didn't have an emotional connection?" Kaveh presses. "Not even with guys?"

"I don't know," he says, frowning. "Not really."

"What about when you hug people?"

"I mean… my grandma used to hug me when I was little."

"Alhaitham!" Kaveh exclaims. "Oh my God, you're like… an emotional virgin!"

"Oh, shut up," Alhaitham huffs.

"No, you are!" he insists. "You've really never had feelings for *anybody?* Not one person in your entire life?"

Alhaitham thinks about it. He never knew his parents—they died when he was young, and he was raised by his grandma. She was pretty strict, but she did give him hugs and bought him ice cream when he showed her his report card. Of course, that pretty much all stopped once he turned twelve. She told him he was becoming a man and had no need for such childish things.

Alhaitham has never been an overly emotional person. He gets annoyed at stupid shit, but he's generally a pretty calm guy. He doesn't even remember the last time he cried about anything. He doesn't really get sad too often, come to think of it, or happy. Girls have called him heartless before. Maybe he is. Maybe that's why he doesn't really feel things like other people do. Maybe something's broken in his brain, and it's never going to be fixed.

After pondering that thought for a few moments, Alhaitham shrugs it off. If that is the case, there's nothing he can really do about it, so he won't waste time worrying about it.

"Maybe I'm a sociopath or something," he suggests.

Kaveh snorts. "No, you're not. Because you have feelings for me."

"I do not have feelings for you," Alhaitham disagrees.

"Oh, *yes* you do," Kaveh insists emphatically. "I'm the first person you've ever had big, gay feelings for, and may I just say, I am *honored."*

"Shut up, nerd."

Kaveh giggles. "So, um… are you gonna, like, flirt back now?"

Alhaitham crosses his arms and says, "I don't know."

"You could try it. You might have fun."

"Hmm. Is it going to make me feel like that again?"

Kaveh's voice softens. "Do you want to feel like that again?" he asks.

"I don't know," Alhaitham says uncertainly. "I guess it was kinda nice. Once I stopped freaking out."

"Okay, well. Try it and see," he suggests.

"Okay," Alhaitham agrees. "Do you want to hop on the game?"

"Yeah, sure. Looks like Cyno and Tighnari are in the server. Want to join them?"

"Let's do it."

***

"You are literally the shittiest tank I have ever had the misfortune of healing, and believe me when I say I have healed a *lot* of shitty tanks."

"Keep up, slowpoke!"

Tighnari growls a little in his throat, desperately throwing out spells to try to mitigate the damage coming at Cyno as he pulls packs of enemies from across the entire room. "Stop pulling!"

"Come on, Nari," says Cyno in that sexy drawl of his. "I know you can take it."

He can't help the little shiver down his spine. "I hate you," he says through his teeth.

"You can hate me while you take it. I don't mind."

"For the love of God, stop making everything sexual!" Tighnari screams. Cyno *finally* stops running, and Tighnari uses the last charge of his dash to catch up. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you-" he chants as he desperately tries to keep Cyno alive.

"Yeaaah boy," Cyno grunts. *"Clench!"*

"I swear to God if you die right now, I will bring you back just so I can stab you in your stupid fucking face!" He enters his tree stance, flooding Cyno with a steady stream of healing as his health dips

dangerously low.

"Yeah, gimme dat *juice!"*

"Shut your fucking mouth! You have a shield, for God's sake, use it!"

"Three seconds."

"You're not gonna make it!"

"Just keep me up, baby, you got this. Two, one- Eat steel, motherfuckers!"

"Oh almighty God in heaven, in the name of our lord and savior *Jesus Christ-"*

"Don't druids, like, worship the moon or some shit?" Cyno comments.

"Yes, but we're gonna need a serious fucking miracle to make it through this. I'm giving you roots."

"That's fine, I'm not going anywhere."

Tighnari growls again as he continues to mentally count out his cooldowns. If he can keep Cyno alive for six more seconds, they've got this. "These DPS are shit, dude. Look at this fool playing ranger, and he can't even AOE."

"'Fight, and you may die. Run, and you'll live—at least a while.'"

"Are you actually quoting Braveheart right now?" Tighnari shouts indignantly.

"'And dying in your beds many years from now,'" he goes on, ignoring his healer's protests, "'would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for one chance, just one chance to come back here and tell our enemies'"—Cyno's character starts to glow as he gets locked into his smite animation—"'THAT THEY MAKE TAKE OUR LIVES, BUT THEY'LL NEVER TAKE OUR FREEDOM!'"

Tighnari sighs in relief as enemies start to drop, and the incoming damage decreases significantly. "You're insane," he says, more exasperated than angry at this point, "and I hate you, and I'm never healing you again."

"Aw, come on, Nari," Cyno coos. "You can't tell me you don't live for these moments. Putting everything on the line, testing your limits,

seeing what your mortal flesh is truly capable of!"

Honestly, it *was* exhilarating, and he and Cyno did synergize their abilities pretty perfectly. But Tighnari will never, ever admit that. "You freak. You absolute monster."

"You know it," he says in his usual suggestive tone.

"Oh my God," Tighnari says, huffing a little in sheer exhaustion. "We're playing PVP after this because I need to clown on some rogues to make myself feel better."

"I thought you were never healing me again."

"I am never healing you again," Tighnari confirms. "I'll let you die for your country like a real man." Two more people enter the voice chat, one right after another. "Oh, thank God," Tighnari greets them. "Please say you're here to rescue me from this madman."

"Cyno, what are you doing to him?" Alhaitham asks.

"Seducing him, obviously," Cyno replies.

"Get it," says Kaveh. "Pull his tail."

"Leave my tail out of it!" Tighnari protests, silently biting his lip at the thought of Cyno pulling his tail as he talks dirty to him. Goddammit, this guy's voice is way too hot. Tighnari is *not* going to survive this guild.

"Send an ass pic," says Kaveh.

"No," Tighnari replies. "Any other stupid requests?"

"What do your ears feel like?" Cyno asks. "Are they soft?"

Tighnari sighs as they enter the final chamber of the dungeon. "Can you just pull the boss so we can be done with this, please?"

"Just tell me if they're soft."

"You will *never* touch my ears, so it makes no difference."

"Are they like a cat's ears or a dog's ears?"

"Neither. Pull."

"Oh yeah, I'll pull 'em hard."

"Okay, I'm pulling," says Tighnari, throwing a moonbeam at the boss.

Cyno immediately taunts it off him and says, "Hey, you're not allowed to do that. Insubordination!"

"You're not the boss of me."

"Oh, but you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Alhaitham cuts in to say, "Cyno, don't make the healer quit before we even get to patch day. You are way more replaceable than he is."

"Ouch! You cut me deep, man," says Cyno. "But I agree. He's pretty fucking good. I pulled the whole room in Palace, and he kept me up."

"You fucking did *not,"* Kaveh says, scandalized. "Why would you do that?"

Cyno snorts. "It was amazing, dude. You should've seen it. Thought we'd wipe for sure."

"Like hell I'm about to let you die on my watch," Tighnari comments.

"Ooh, you suddenly changed your tune," Cyno calls out as they all dodge the boss' flailing tentacles. "You want me to live now? I'll live just for you, baby."

"I'm not your baby, asshole."

"If you know how to be my lover, maybe you can be my baby," Cyno starts to sing.

"Shut the fuck up before I make you," Tighnari threatens.

"Cyno, I swear to God," Alhaitham interjects, "if he leaves because of you, I will make sure you never have another PVP win as long as you live."

"What if we're on the same team?" Cyno asks.

"I'll throw."

"Bruh," Cyno grunts. "That's really uncool."

"No singing, and no sex jokes," Alhaitham says firmly.

"And no Braveheart!" Tighnari adds.

Cyno whines into the mic. "Dude, that's like, half my material!"

"Find new material," says Alhaitham.

"Ugh, fine," Cyno groans. "We'll just have these epic, cinematic battles in complete silence. Happy?"

"As long as I don't have to hear your voice," Tighnari quips.

Tighnari's a fucking liar, is the thing, because he *loves* Cyno's voice. He literally just wants to lay in bed and listen to Cyno whisper things in his ear all night. He doesn't even care what it is—it could be terrible puns, innuendos, even his grocery list. Tighnari just can't help hanging on to his every word no matter what kind of stupid shit is coming out of his mouth.

Cyno can never, ever know this, which is why Tighnari will deny it unto his dying breath. But it's unfortunately still very true, and it's the only reason Tighnari even joined this terrible guild. That, and no one else would take him.

Healers in this game are valuable because they're rare. Unlike most games, healing in Genshin actually takes skill. That's part of the reason Tighnari dedicates most of his free time to the game, and the other part is that he has an unhealthy attachment to the characters. He has actually cried at multiple cutscenes in this game. He listens to YouTube lore videos at work all the time just so he can leave snarky corrections in the comments. He loves this game, okay? He loves it way too much, and it majorly affects his ability to make real-world attachments.

Tighnari's ex ended their three-year relationship because of Genshin. And then he met his next boyfriend while playing Genshin, and he moved to fucking middle-of-nowhere Idaho to be with him just for the prick to cheat on him with a virtual catgirl. The worst part of it was, Tighnari was way cuter than that catgirl. He's a real-life foxboy, and it still wasn't enough. Tighnari lost to virtual titties, and he will never, ever get over that. He still gets incredibly salty whenever he thinks about it.

Tighnari is actually a really nice, friendly, chill guy. But every time he logs onto Genshin, he morphs into a raging inferno that consumes everything in its path. He knows it's not healthy. He knows he needs to quit this game for the sake of his own mental health, but he also

knows that he will never do that. He hasn't put up with this much suffering over the years to just up and *leave.* This game makes him into a miserable cunt, and he's aware of that, but he just can't stop.

The four of them load into a PVP game of capture the flag, in which Cyno has the most deaths but also the most objective time. He really is insane. Tighnari actually admires it a little. He just fucking throws himself in there without a single thought about his own survival, but he's good enough at paladin that he can actually get away with it. Sometimes.

Tighnari logs off to go cook dinner, and he gets a Discord notification on his phone while he's chopping vegetables. He ignores it until it's time to start dumping stuff into the pan, letting the shallots and garlic sizzle as he picks up his phone.

Cyno: What are you making?

Tighnari: Did you really DM me immediately after getting off a call with me? Aren't you worried that might come across a little desperate?

Cyno: I'll take that chance
Cyno: Are you actually a good cook?

Tighnari: I like cooking. It's not always fancy, but it tastes good. Usually

Cyno: Have you ever made tahchin?

Tighnari: Never heard of it

Cyno: It's kind of like a savory cake
Cyno: My mom used to make it. It's the only memory I have of her

After Tighnari throws the carrots in he blinks at his phone, taken aback for a moment. Quite a tone shift from their usual conversations. He has noticed that Cyno seems less obnoxious over text, but a few days of exchanging messages doesn't really feel enough to start talking about your dead mother out of nowhere. Tighnari's not sure what to say.

Tighnari: You miss her?

Cyno: Didn't really know her well enough to miss her, to be honest

Tighnari: Sorry to hear that

Cyno: Don't be
Cyno: Sorry, it was just a random thought
Cyno: I didn't mean to get all serious suddenly

Tighnari: No, it's okay

Cyno: I made it weird huh

Tighnari: Well you're making it weird now

Cyno: Sorry
Cyno: You make me nervous

Tighnari scoffs out loud at his phone. There's no way. This guy? *This guy* is nervous to talk to him? The one who just spent two hours making lewd jokes and calling Tighnari his baby and singing Ariana Grande? Tighnari's goofy smile widens.

Tighnari: Seriously???

Cyno: Yeah. I know a talk a lot of shit but it's just because I don't know what to say to you

Tighnari: I don't mind the way you talk to me

Cyno: You don't?

Tighnari: Not really

Cyno: Okay, good to know
Cyno: So when you're screaming that you hate me and that you're never healing me again… what do you actually mean?

Tighnari: That I love you and can't wait to spend all of next patch shoving plants up your asshole

Cyno: Aww that's so sweet
Cyno: I love you too

Tighnari: Shut the fuck up

Cyno: So you want me to keep talking? Got it
Cyno: I'll just do the opposite of whatever you say

Tighnari: Kiss me

Cyno: …

Tighnari: LOL get rekt loser
Tighnari: I would never kiss you

Cyno: Wait help, I don't know which one to take the opposite of

Tighnari: Let me know when you figure it out

Chapter 3: Sethos, You Are A Snack

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The guild blocks out three hours on patch day to test out the new raid. Sethos is a little intimidated by the other guild members. These guys are really serious about the game. Sethos has been gaming his entire life, but he's definitely more of a casual player. He likes to have fun and explore and just immerse himself in fantasy worlds to forget about his problems. He likes having little tasks to do and people to talk to. It's fun.

Back when he was playing World of Warcraft, he did try to get into raiding. It was just way too intense. People were yelling and getting mad at him, and Sethos really hates when people are mad at him. So he gave up pretty quickly.

Then he reconnected with Cyno a few years back. Sethos' family moved to Utah when he was little, so he and Cyno didn't grow up together or anything. His parents are pretty well off, and he's an only child, so they were able to fly back to South Carolina frequently to visit the rest of the family. Cyno was always his favorite cousin. They had a great time hanging out and playing together. But they didn't really talk much outside those visits.

About six years ago, Cyno noticed from his Discord status that Sethos was playing Valorant and asked if he wanted to play together sometime. That was how they got back to talking, and then to Sethos' surprise, they actually ended up becoming pretty close. It's at the point now where Sethos can easily call Cyno his best friend. And that's nice.

Sethos admires Cyno in a lot of ways. He started playing Genshin because of him, and he's been having a lot of fun. Cyno has been trying to convince him to start raiding for weeks, and although Sethos is still pretty nervous about it, he feels better knowing that Cyno will be there. At least that's one person who will stick up for him if he does something wrong.

They're starting at 6pm Utah time to give everyone time to get home from work and unlock the raid. Sethos owns his own dental practice, so technically he can be home any time he wants, but since he already

has appointments booked he's not about to just cancel them. He doesn't want to let anybody down. People trust him with their teeth, and Sethos takes that responsibility very seriously.

Sethos sees everyone in VC except for Scara. He blushes just thinking about her. It's kind of embarrassing how awkward he is around women, especially given that he's almost thirty. Girls are just… pretty. Which is a stupid excuse because he doesn't even know what Scara looks like. He just *knows* she's pretty. She sounds pretty.

He doesn't join yet, since he wants to focus on the story anyway. The whole raid is about finally fighting Dottore, who's been causing havoc in the world of Teyvat for quite some time now. This is only the first raid tier of three, so they're not actually fighting Dottore yet. They have to make it through his evil research lab first.

The story is great, and Sethos is excited to fight the first boss. Once he has it unlocked he notices Scara is in VC now. He forces himself to take a couple deep breaths before clicking to join.

"Hey, there he is!" says Kaveh.

"We were just wondering if you were gonna bitch out," says Alhaitham.

"Come on, boys," says Scara in her pretty, soft voice. "Sethos isn't a bitch. Are you, Sethos?"

"Um." Sethos clears his throat. "No?"

"See?"

"I knew he'd be here," Cyno says confidently. "I got faith in you, man. You're gonna do great."

Sethos smiles, feeling a warm surge in his chest. "I'll do my best."

"Okay," says Alhaitham, all business. "So this is clearly a vampire-type boss. There's going to be some kind of lifesteal and probably a special mechanic to finish him off. But I doubt we get that far on the first day."

"I wonder how the research subjects play into it," Kaveh muses. "Are they just adds or are we supposed to save them?"

"Oh God, please be adds," says Tighnari. "If I have to heal them or

something, I'll ragequit."

Cyno snorts. "You really hate healing, don't you?"

"And you hate living," Tighnari returns. "Which is probably why you're such a shit tank."

"Aww, thank you, Nari," Cyno coos. "Just so you guys know, whenever Nari says something mean, you just have to take the opposite."

"What about when he says something nice?" Sethos asks.

Everyone in chat starts to laugh. Sethos joins in, grinning widely. He loves making people laugh.

"Okay, but seriously," says Kaveh. "Do we want to start now since we're all here?"

"I think I still have one more cutscene," says Tighnari.

"Well, hurry up," says Cyno.

"Don't rush me! I need time to absorb the lore."

"Nerd."

"Fuck you."

"Uh, how do I take the opposite of that?"

"You fucking him, obviously," says Kaveh.

"Oh, sweet!" Cyno replies.

Sethos raises an eyebrow. What is his cousin doing? Cyno has always been the type of guy who would do anything for a laugh, but this is taking things a little far. Sethos has never heard him talk so much about having sex with another guy before.

Not that he judges that kind of thing! Not anymore, anyway. Sethos grew up Mormon, so he was always taught to be kind to everyone. That being said, gay sex has always been one of those things that they, um… strongly discourage. Along with any sex outside of marriage, but especially the gay stuff. Sethos doesn't believe in any of those silly rules anymore! But he used to believe them pretty strongly, and it's been kind of weird to get used to the way Cyno talks. He's very lewd and swears a lot. Sethos used to cringe every time he heard the f-

bomb, but the exposure therapy has been good for him.

Still, Cyno doesn't usually go all-in on flirting with guys like this. Sethos is definitely going to have to message him later and ask what's going on. For now, though, he just hangs out in chat while Tighnari finishes unlocking the raid, and then they all party up and get ready to go in.

"Everyone eat your food!" Kaveh reminds them. "Get your pots ready."

"This arena is so lit," says Cyno.

"I'm guessing we are not supposed to step on the bloody torture spikes?" Sethos questions.

"Yeah, let's avoid that," Kaveh agrees. "Okay, ready check." Everyone selects that they're ready to start. "Alright. Cyno, count us down."

"Everyone spread until we figure out if we need to stack for anything," Alhaitham reminds them. "Remember your positions?"

"Yep!" Sethos confirms. He's on the southwest corner. That's where he's supposed to stand until someone tells him to move somewhere else. He'll still be in range to hit everyone with his buffs but also far enough away not to damage anyone else if he gets targeted with something.

From the moment the countdown timer hits zero, the run is a mess. Sethos is nervous about how many times he dies, but everyone else is dying constantly, too. He's still kind of on edge waiting for someone to yell at him, but no one does.

"Okay, well, we learned a lot," says Kaveh after they finally agree to give it up for the night. "Strats will probably start releasing tomorrow. Did you get an answer on your Saturday thing, Scara?"

"Yeah," she replies. "I'm good for Saturday."

"Alright, then," he chirps, "I'll create the event in the server, and it'll adjust to your local time zone. Just remember that Alhaitham will get cranky if we keep him up too late, so we have to finish on time."

"Sleep is an important factor of physical health," Alhaitham gripes.

"Well, I'll make sure to properly wear you out first, then," Kaveh says in a suggestive tone.

A couple people laugh. And then Alhaitham says quietly, "Sounds

promising."

The server is dead silent for a moment before Cyno lets out a wolf whistle. Then he says, "Wait, Kaveh, send a selfie to the chat."

"Why?" Kaveh asks.

"So I can see if you're cute."

"I'm *very* cute. Hang on."

The photo comes through. Kaveh looks a little feminine for a guy, but not in a bad way. Sethos might even mistake him for a woman if it wasn't for the V-neck revealing his flat chest.

Cyno whistles again. "Okay, now Alhaitham."

"You already know what I look like," Alhaitham points out.

"Yeah, but I want to see side-by-side so I can picture it."

Tighnari groans into his mic. "You cannot be this horny 24/7. It's unsustainable."

"I'm built different," says Cyno.

"Fuck off," says Alhaitham. "I'm going to bed."

"Ooh, take me with you?" says Kaveh.

"Not tonight. Maybe later. Good night."

He leaves the chat. Cyno sighs and says, "Damn. Well, at least I got this one. Hey Nari, post a pic."

"Bite me," he replies. "Night, losers."

Kaveh leaves too, and then it's just Cyno and Sethos.

"Hey, Cyno," he says.

"Yeah?"

"What's your deal with Tighnari?"

"Uhhh… what do you mean?"

Sethos gives his monitor an unimpressed look. "You know exactly

what I mean."

"Nope!" Cyno says quickly. "Night, cousin!"

He leaves without waiting for Sethos to reply. Sethos rolls his eyes and clicks off the chat.

He keeps playing Genshin for another couple of hours before he decides it's probably a good time to go to bed. He sees Scara is still online. Sethos hasn't added her yet, but he wants to. He just doesn't know what to say.

Sethos has never… *been with* a woman. Cyno is the only person on this earth he has ever admitted that to, although technically his parents also know. They think Sethos is still a good little Mormon boy who would never sully a woman outside of a marriage contract. It's just easier to lie to them. Sethos doesn't want to rock the boat.

He does want to kiss a girl, though. It's kind of embarrassing that he's almost thirty, and he hasn't even kissed a girl yet. He's been on dates, but he was always a perfect gentleman. And also awkward as hell. So yeah, he hasn't had his first kiss. Not for lack of trying! Okay, sure, maybe he hasn't been out that much since dental school. And then he started the practice, and well, that takes up a lot of time. Sethos will get there eventually. Someday he's going to finally kiss a girl, and then maybe… other stuff.

He wonders, not for the first time, what Scara looks like. Pretty. Curvy. Soft. Sethos' cheeks flush red, and he quickly closes Discord.

"Frick," he says quietly to himself, and then more confidently, "Fuck. Fucking… *fuck."*

It still feels weird to say. Sethos sighs and gives up and goes to bed. And if he shamefully strokes himself under the covers while thinking about Scara's voice, well… nobody has to know.

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The guild's first couple attempts at the new raid tier are a little bit of a disaster, but that's to be expected. They manage to clear the first instance on normal difficulty in their Saturday session and move onto the next. Before long they've cleared the entire set of four raids, which means it's time for hard mode.

Sethos is still pretty nervous about it, so Cyno has been helping him

run the normals just to get the main mechanics down. Cyno doesn't mind—he loves this fucking game. Any chance he gets to fight shit, he'll absolutely take.

Cyno's kind of an intense guy. Anyone that knows him knows he's obsessed with war movies. Anything with dudes fighting each other, he'll watch. He really likes fantasy settings, too, which is why video games are perfect. He gets to immerse himself in the fighting, he gets to be *in the war*. He can put on armor and carry a big sword and be on the front line of an epic battle, for blood and country!

He always plays tank, too. He wants to be in the thick of it. He wants to run in swinging and screaming. Knowing this about him, you might think he'd be the kind of guy who plays barbarian. He actually did start playing as barbarian, and he did that for awhile before he decided to give paladin a shot, and *dude*. It was life-changing.

There were some other things going on at that time, too. His girlfriend had just broken up with him because of his 'anger issues.' Honestly, Cyno didn't have a clue what she was talking about when she said that. He never once raised his voice at her or anything like that. He asked her to clarify, and she said she was talking about the ways he screams at his computer.

To be clear, Cyno does scream at his computer. A lot. But it's not like he's yelling at people. He's just having a good time, and yeah, sometimes that involves random screaming. It's definitely not anger issues. He's just, y'know… talking about cutting people's heads off and putting them on spikes. It's violent, yes. Gory, sure. But that's not the same thing!

Anyway, Cyno took it kind of personally at the time. He didn't want to be a barbarian type of guy. Nobody wants to date that guy. So he rolled a paladin. The class plays completely different. It's more engaging, more dynamic, plus he can smite people! He protects the innocent with his sword and shield, and he stands for truth and justice. And there are still plenty of epic battles, so that's good.

Maybe the lesson Cyno should've learned there was not to base his entire personality around an MMORPG class fantasy, but that's not the lesson he learned at all. What he learned was that girls are into paladins. They want to fuck paladins. Cyno's into guys too, but they don't really eat that shit up the way girls do. He's still managed to bag a few, though. It doesn't really make a difference to him what gender someone is as long as they're cute. Boy, girl, both, neither, whatever.

Cute is cute.

Speaking of cute, you know who's cute? Tighnari. Cyno wants him bad. It wouldn't be the first time he's hooked up with someone over Genshin. He wants that ass, and he is *going* to get it. He doesn't care how long it takes.

He manages to put the fox out of his mind while he plays with Sethos that night. He has to, otherwise things might get a little uncomfortable down there.

"On hard mode, you want to drop this north while the rest of the raid stacks south on the tower," Cyno says to his cousin, cleanly running through his rotation as he gives advice. He doesn't even really have to pay attention on normal mode.

"Okay, got it," says Sethos. "And then it spins east-west?"

"Yep," Cyno confirms. "If she raises one sword it goes clockwise, and two swords means counterclockwise."

Sethos grunts. "Man, how do you remember all this stuff?"

"You can keep notes if it helps. After that, it just comes down to practice."

He sighs into his mic. "I'm never going to be as good as the rest of you."

"Well, not with that attitude!" Cyno agrees.

"You've all been playing forever," he goes on. "I'm just going to hold you back. I should've never joined the guild."

Cyno lets out a deep sigh. The boss goes down halfway through the last mechanic, and he lets go of his keyboard and mouse to start gesturing with his hands as if Sethos is in front of him. "Listen up, young Padawan."

"I'm only a year younger than you."

"Zzt! Older and wiser cousin speaking, here." He talks with his hands, gesturing emphatically. "Look, hard mode *is* hard. Okay? But you've done way harder shit in your life. You got through dental school. You left the religion you grew up with because you realized it was ass-backwards. This is just a video game. It's not that fucking serious, so

relax. What's gonna happen to you if you can't clear this raid, huh? Nothing. Absolutely fucking nothing. I'm still gonna be your cousin, and we're still gonna game together and shoot the shit. Failure has absolutely zero consequences, so it makes no sense to worry about it."

Sethos is quiet for a moment. "I guess you're right. I just… want to be good. Like you."

Cyno grins. He puts his hands back down and directs his character out of the raid instance. "Okay, well, you're never going to be as good as me, let's be honest."

"Wow, thanks."

"But you are good enough," he says firmly. "So don't doubt yourself. You can do this."

Sethos is quiet for a minute before saying, "Thank you, Cyno. I know I've been kind of annoying-"

"Ah-ah, nope, none of that," Cyno says immediately. "I won't let anybody talk shit about you, and that includes you."

Sethos snorts. "Okay."

"Let's take a break. Want to do some PVP?" Before Sethos can answer, someone else joins the call. "Sup?" he greets them.

"Hey," says Scara. "What are you boys up to?"

"Just finished up normal raids," Cyno replies. "Trying to get Sethos a little more comfy with the mechanics."

"Oh. How's that going?"

Cyno says nothing, waiting for Sethos to answer. It seems to take him a moment to realize he should. "Um, it's good," he finally says. "I think I'm ready to fight the vampire guy on Saturday."

"Awesome! Have you done your dailies yet?"

"Not yet," Cyno replies.

"Want to queue up?" she asks next.

Cyno chuckles. "You just want me for my big sword and shield."

"Guilty," Scara says with a little laugh. "DPS queues are a nightmare right now."

"Valid." Cyno clicks to invite her to the party, and she joins. He signs them up.

"So, Cyno," says Scara, "I have a question for you."

"Shoot."

"Are you ever going to flirt with me the way you flirt with Tighnari?" she asks him.

Cyno chuckles. "Why, you jealous?"

"I didn't say that."

"You totally are," Cyno insists. "Post a selfie in the chat, and we'll see."

She scoffs. "So it's all about looks for you, huh?"

"Come on, post it. I bet you're hot. You sound hot."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder," she quotes.

"So let me behold you, then."

She hums for a moment and then says, "No."

"Okay, well then." He shrugs. "You don't get any of my good material."

"God, you're *mean,"* she whines. Their queue pops, and all three of them load into the instance. "Hey, Sethos. You'll flirt with me, won't you?" Scara asks him.

Cyno tries not to snort out loud. He's heard Sethos attempt to flirt before, and it's not pretty. Poor kid. It's not his fault he grew up in a crazy cult. Sethos is a nice guy. He deserves some action.

Maybe Cyno can help him out. A devious grin forms on his face.

"I, um," Sethos stutters. "Sure, I guess."

Cyno stays silent and does a countdown before starting the fight.

"You guess?" Scara repeats, and then she sighs. "Okay, I'll take what I can get. Give me your best line."

"My best…?" He laughs awkwardly. "I- I don't think I have any lines."

"What? Come on. Just pretend you saw me across the street and thought I was pretty. What would you say to get my attention?"

Sethos laughs again. "I don't know? I'd probably just assume you wanted to be left alone."

He's floundering over there. Cyno has to throw him a life raft. "I got you, man. I'll send you one," he offers. He clicks to his other monitor and types in between his rotation.

As soon as Sethos reads the message, he lets out a little yelp. "I'm not saying that!"

"Come *on,"* Cyno eggs him on. "It's a good line. It'll totally work on her."

"What is it?" Scara asks.

"No, there's no way," Sethos insists.

"Aw. Please?"

Sethos caves easily. "Fine. Only if you promise not to get mad."

"I won't get mad," she promises.

He clears his throat once. Twice. Finally, he says, "Hey baby, you look like you're feeling down. Want me to feel you up?"

Scara lets out a little giggle that's actually really cute. Maybe Cyno *should* flirt with her. But no, Sethos is clearly into her. This is a mission to help his cousin now.

"Please do," she replies in a sultry tone.

"There's no way that line would actually work on you," Sethos protests. "If I just randomly came up and said that to you, you'd slap me."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Really?"

"Not if it was you saying it," she clarifies.

Sethos scoffs. "What if I'm an ugly creep?"

"Are you? Send me a pic."

"No," he says immediately.

Cyno butts in to say, "If you don't, I will."

"Cyno!" Sethos yelps. "Don't!"

"Why not?" Cyno demands. "You're a good-looking guy. She'll think you're cute."

"No, she won't," he hisses back.

"How do you know?" Scara asks.

"Because girls never think I'm cute!"

Scara lets out a surprised noise, then says, "Aww. Come on, Sethos. I bet you're cute."

"I'm not," he insists.

Goddamn his cousin's non-existent self esteem. You know what? Cyno is about to do him a solid. "I'm sending it," he says, pulling out his phone.

"Don't you dare!" Sethos screams.

Cyno ignores him. He goes through his gallery with one hand while he plays with the other. He has some photos from when Sethos visited last summer. He's looking for one in particular. He got a really good shot of Sethos drinking boba. It was completely candid. Cyno was just taking pictures of their boba, and Sethos didn't even realize his camera was still on. He's just sitting there biting the straw and smiling.

He finds the photo and taps to send it to the chat. "Got it! Here."

"Cyno, please don't-"

"Already done," he says unrepentantly. "You can thank me later."

"Don't look at it," Sethos begs.

Scara lets out a gasp and says, "Oh, my God! This is you?" A throaty chuckle follows. "Oh, Sethos, you are a *snack."*

Sethos lets out a strangled noise. "Don't make fun of me."

"Why would I make fun of you?" she asks. "You have an adorable smile, and your arms are delicious. Do you work out?"

"Um… yeah. You-?" He clears his throat. "You're not just messing with me? You really think I'm cute?"

"Honey, you're a lot more than cute," she says huskily. "You are sex on a stick. You look like you could throw me around. I'm dripping just thinking about it."

Sethos lets out another noise that sounds like an aborted scream. "I- You- Um."

The fight ends. It was just a quick boss for their dailies. "I'll just leave you two alone for a minute," says Cyno, hopping out of the call.

Sethos immediately sends him a message.

Sethos: DON'T LEAVE ME ALONE WITH HER

Cyno: Come on, buddy. You got this

Sethos: COME BACK RIGHT NOW
Sethos: I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DOOOO

Cyno: Dude it's easy. Just tell her what you want to do to her

Sethos: How the hell would I know that? Did you forget I am a VIRGIN???

Cyno: Yeah but you've seen porn

Sethos: NO

Cyno: Wait seriously?

Sethos: SERIOUSLY
Sethos: Help me you butthead I hate you so much right now omg

Cyno: Okay. First of all, calm down. This is not rocket science
Cyno: What's she saying?

Sethos: She says I don't have to do anything if I'm uncomfortable

Cyno: Are you uncomfortable?

Sethos: VERY

Cyno: Okay then tell her that

Sethos: She's apologizing now

Cyno: Tell her you want to get to know her better
Cyno: Maybe if you talk to her some more you can just ease into this nice and slow

Sethos: Okay
Sethos: She said that's fine
Sethos: Are you coming back?

Cyno: Why, you need me to hold your hand?

Sethos: Yes please save me

Cyno sighs. Well, he gave it his best shot. He rejoins the call and says, "Hi again."

"Hi-ii," Scara singsongs.

"I hate you," says Sethos.

"Aww," Scara coos. "It's okay, Sethos. I won't *bite* you. Not without your consent."

"Okay, let's play the game now, please," Sethos says desperately.

They do another couple of runs together. Scara and Cyno both behave for the rest of it. Cyno actually feels a little guilty. He did kind of throw his cousin to the she-wolf. He knows how girls like Scara operate. Cyno has gotten off with many a slut, and they use the same playbook every time. That's not a criticism, necessarily—Cyno kind of does that, too. But he should've realized Sethos wasn't ready for that yet. Cyno's still trying to teach him how to swear, after all.

When the last daily is completed, Sethos says quickly, "Okay, that was fun, Ihavetogonowbye," and leaves the chat.

Scara chuckles over the call. "How could you be so cruel to your own cousin?"

"Uh, you started it!" he reminds her.

"Well, I was gunning for you."

"Yeah?" Cyno smirks. "It's the voice, huh? Girls love my voice."

"It's a very nice voice," she purrs. "If you ever change your mind…"

Cyno considers it for a moment before saying, "Nah. I can't do that to my cousin, dude."

Scara scoffs. "Cyno, I will tell you right now I'm not a one-man type of girl."

"Oh, I know you're not," Cyno replies. "How come you wouldn't send a pic? Usually girls like you are all about posting their titties the second they get an invitation."

"Well, that's really none of your business, Cyno," she says sweetly.

"Ah, I see. She likes to keep a little mystery."

"Maybe." She huffs, then says bitterly, "You're really set on Tighnari, huh?"

"Uh, have you seen him?"

She giggles and says, "Yeah, I saw. He's cute. Not my type."

"Is Sethos your type?"

"Mmm." She doesn't answer for a moment. "I like a guy who works out."

"So he's not your type."

"You're more my type."

Cyno clicks his tongue. "Too bad, girly pop. I'm a real visual kind of guy."

"Why do I feel like you're bullying me for nudes right now?" she asks.

"Save your nudes for someone who gives a fuck."

Shocked laughter rings through the mic. "You're so *mean,"* she whines in the way girls always do when what they really mean is *take me now, baby*.

"As a paladin, I value familial bonds and loyalty," he says stubbornly.

"Okay, fine, I'll save it for your cousin."

"He can do better than you."

"With that body? Yeah, definitely," she agrees. "Why's he so awkward?"

"He's not used to being hot. He's a late bloomer."

"Ah, I see." She sighs. "Well. Some girls like 'em sweet."

"Not you, though."

"I'm not opposed to sweet!" she argues. "It's just not what I'm used to."

Cyno purses his lips, getting serious for a moment. "He's a good guy. Be gentle with him."

"Alright, I will."

"Promise."

"I promise," she says.

Cyno listens carefully before deciding to trust that she's being sincere. Maybe that's a mistake, but well, it's like he said: his cousin deserves some action. Maybe she can break down some of his walls, and that could be good for him. Everyone should fuck a slut at least once. They can teach you a lot.

"Alright," Cyno says. "I'm gonna log off. Have a nice night, slut."

"You too, fuckboy."

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Scara sighs as he leaves the voice chat. After a moment, his head thumps down onto the desk. "You dumb fucking ho," he says, muffled.

He told himself he wasn't going to mix the raid group with work. And he didn't! Technically. Just… he was horny, and he saw Cyno and Sethos there, and he figured he could nab at least one of them real quick. He would've preferred Cyno, but he was fine with getting Sethos. That didn't pan out, though.

He grunts in frustration. Couldn't have just kept it in his pants. Hearing Cyno say all that stuff to Tighnari just turns him on every

time. Why can't someone talk to him like that? *That's* what Scara needs.

Oh, well. It's not like he can't just log in and find someone else to fill his needs in five seconds flat whenever he wants. Hell, he gets *paid* to do that. He's got it pretty good, honestly. He's just a little salty that he couldn't bag Cyno.

Sethos, though… Well, it was kind of shock to see what he looked like. Scara's reaction was genuine. It's not what he was picturing at all. He thought Sethos would look like the nerd he is, but instead he looks like some kind of benevolent sex god. Shame he doesn't have the personality to match. He is sweet, though. And like Scara said, he's not *opposed* to sweet. It doesn't really get him going, but maybe Sethos can be taught.

A little smirk works its way onto his face as he lifts his head from the desk. Now that actually sounds like it could be fun.

Chapter End Notes

Adds: Enemies in a boss fight that are not the boss and are basically just there to ruin your fucking day.

Pots: Potions that you use during a big fight, usually to increase DPS.

***

Scara and Cyno have formed what will henceforth be termed the slut-fuckboy alliance. It is the most powerful bond known to man. Shenanigans to follow.

Haikaveh smut next chapter LET'S GO!!!

Also I am going to rag on Mormons quite a lot in this fic. I was actually raised Mormon, and I may or may not have dumped some personal childhood trauma onto Sethos. Sorry Sethos. Scara will be very, very nice to you as an apology.

Chapter 4: The Average Genshin Player Has the Maturity Level of a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Alright, I'm calling it," says Kaveh.

"It's not time yet," Alhaitham argues immediately.

"Well, you're getting bitchy," Kaveh insists. "You need to go to sleep."

"You're the bitch, bitch."

"Wooow, so witty. You definitely need to go to bed." He smiles despite himself. "Want me to tuck you in?"

"Fuck off," Alhaitham replies.

"You do seem a little cranky," Cyno comments. "Didn't sleep well?"

"No," he says grumpily. *"Somebody* kept me up all night farming for a stupid spider mount."

"That stupid spider mount is worth six mil," Kaveh reminds him. "How else am I supposed to fund my interior decorating addiction?"

"I don't care, just leave me out of it."

Kaveh scoffs indignantly. "I'm sorry, how many hours have we dedicated to farming your glamour pieces? That stupid demon helm took up an entire weekend, and you wore it for two weeks."

"The chest piece was a slightly different shade of black."

"Your glam does look pretty hardcore," Scara points out. Her character walks up to Alhaitham's, checking out his outfit.

Cyno snorts. "Yeah, and you look like you're about to grab a pumpkin spice latte in your Prius on the way back from pilates."

"Are you calling me a basic bitch?" Scara asks him. "You literally look like the tin man from Wizard of Oz over there."

Cyno sucks in a dramatic gasp and says, "How *dare* you. I look like I'm about to have an epic fantasy battle!"

"Mhmm. Need some oil for those joints?" She giggles at her own joke. "At least your cousin has some fashion sense." She walks up to him next. "Hey there, you sexy little lute-strummer."

"Yeah, I think we should call it a night, too," Sethos says quickly.

"Aww. No fun."

"Didn't you say when you joined it was because the guys in your last guild were thirsting over you too much?" Kaveh reminds her. "And yet you've been coming on to Sethos all night."

She makes a little hum. "I don't mind when *cute* guys thirst over me."

"Kinda feel like you made your own bed, here," says Kaveh.

"I never make my bed," she says. "There's no point trying to tidy up dirty sheets."

"Ew, wash your sheets." Kaveh clicks to leave the raid instance. "We'll pick it up again next week. This is our last one before we can start hitting hardcore."

"Yeaaah boy," says Cyno. "That's what I'm talking about."

"Who named these difficulty settings?" Tighnari wonders. "They've got to know the average Genshin player has the maturity level of a thirteen-year-old boy."

"Oh, they know," Cyno replies. "It was intentional."

"I'll see you guys next week," says Sethos, jumping out of the call.

The chat is quiet for a moment. "He knows he's the one holding us back," Alhaitham points out.

"He's not doing too bad," Cyno says instantly.

"He needs more practice," says Kaveh.

"He doesn't need practice," Cyno argues. "He needs confidence. Scara, get on that."

"I'm working on it," she says. "He's very stubborn."

"Well, step it up!" says Cyno. "I know you can crack him."

"Your cousin's a tough nut."

"Maybe you're just not that good."

Scara scoffs and says, "Please. I'm a professional. See you next week, boys."

"Night," says Kaveh. Scara leaves the call. "Okay, am I the only one who's *really* curious what she looks like?"

"You were the one threatening to ban her if she posted titties," Alhaitham reminds him.

Kaveh waves a hand. "That was weeks ago. I feel like we've earned the titties at this point."

"Why do *you* want to see a girl's tits?" Alhaitham asks him. "You wouldn't have a clue what to do with them."

"Put your face between 'em and go brrr," Tighnari says, and everyone cracks up. "What? Girls like that, right?"

"You gay motherfucker," Cyno remarks. "They hate it when you do that."

"Oh, damn," says Tighnari. "Welp. Guess I'll just stick to what I know. Good night, losers."

"Wait, Nari!" Cyno calls out.

"Yeah?"

"You going to bed?"

"Yeah…" he says suspiciously.

"Okay. Just checking."

Everyone pauses to see what else he's going to say, but he doesn't follow it up with anything.

"You should be very afraid," Kaveh advises. "Good night, everybody."

He hops off the call. It's still pretty early for him, so he doesn't log off the game yet. He teleports to his house to get a little crafting done. It's

not long before a message pops up from Alhaitham.

Alhaitham: I think we should try to stack the triangles on the second phase. The positioning is too complicated

Kaveh: Omg go to sleep

Alhaitham: I will. In a minute

Kaveh: Will you? Or do you want me to keep you up again?

Kaveh bites his bottom lip. He really would like to move things along with Alhaitham. It's been awhile now since his confession, but it doesn't feel like anything has changed. Sure, he flirts back sometimes, but he never initiates it. Kaveh doesn't know why he's being so shy about this.

He was beyond excited to find out Alhaitham was into him. Kaveh has been carrying a torch for him for over a year, so when he learned that Alhaitham actually reciprocated, he had all these ideas about how it was going to go. An exchange of risque photos, a few private calls late at night. Kaveh sexts like a pro, and that's the only thing you can really do from almost three thousand miles away, right? But whenever he tries, Alhaitham just shrugs him off.

Maybe he needs to be less subtle. Stop dropping hints and just come out and say it.

Kaveh: I want the dick

Alhaitham stops typing for a moment before he starts again. Kaveh watches for several long, torturous seconds before he gets impatient.

Kaveh: What are you doing over there, composing a novel?

Alhaitham: Shut up

Kaveh: Why? You're shutting up enough for the both of us

Alhaitham starts a call. Kaveh quickly accepts. "Dickhead," Alhaitham greets him.

"Alhaitham," Kaveh whines. "Are you ever going to send me a *single* dirty message?"

He sighs. "I don't know, it feels weird."

"Weird? What, you don't sext people?"

"Not really."

"Aww," Kaveh coos. "So you're a sexting virgin."

"Stop calling me a virgin," Alhaitham snaps. "How about you just shut up and get on your knees?"

An electric thrill races through Kaveh's blood. He immediately pushes his chair out and sinks onto the carpet. "Okay. What now?"

"Turn your webcam on," says Alhaitham.

"Well, I'll have to get off my knees," Kaveh complains, rising to adjust his webcam.

"Don't you fucking sass me."

Kaveh shivers. "Sorry, sir."

He pulls off his headphones and turns on video, switching the mic to his webcam. Alhaitham does the same. He looks cool as a cucumber leaning back in his sleek office chair. Even Alhaitham's leisurewear never has a single wrinkle in it. Kaveh's just in a pair of shorts and a crop top. If he had known this was happening, he would've worn something sexier.

He gets back onto his knees and looks up into the camera. "What now?" he asks softly.

Alhaitham hesitates for a second. "Is that what you always wear around the house?"

Kaveh shrugs and says, "Yeah."

"Bet if I made you come over here and clean, your ass cheeks would spill out while you're wiping down the counters."

Kaveh smirks. "Maybe. You want to find out?"

"Yeah."

He gets up and looks around for a moment. How is he going to do this? He ends up grabbing his office chair and pushing it out. He leans forward and runs his hand over the top like he's cleaning the leather. The farther down he goes, the more his ass sticks out. After a few

moments of this, he looks back to the camera.

"Well?" he asks.

"You have a mole on your ass."

Kaveh snorts and palms his left cheek. "Yeah."

"It's cute," says Alhaitham.

"Thank you," he purrs. He pulls back and slaps his own ass. He cants forward a little bit and moans. He hears Alhaitham grunt softly and throws the camera a smirk. "You like that?" he teases.

"You're so fucking hot."

"I know," he says lightly. "You want to see more?"

"Yeah. Take your clothes off. Slowly."

Kaveh hums in his throat, feeling a warm spike of anticipation. He turns to face the camera and plays with the hem of his shirt a little, hands ghosting over his abs. He lifts it up, pulling it over his head and shaking his hair before tossing it to the side. Alhaitham watches with rapt attention.

"I feel like I'm shooting a porno or something," he remarks, snapping the elastic waist of his shorts.

Alhaitham smiles lazily. "What, you've never shot a porno before? Guess that makes you a porno virgin."

Kaveh snorts and says, "Dick."

"Not yet," says Alhaitham. "Maybe later, if you're good."

A little shiver crawls down his spine. "I'm loving this side of you," he comments, sliding the shorts down his legs. "Shame you were too shy to show me sooner." He kicks the shorts out of frame.

"Watch your mouth," Alhaitham warns him.

"Or what?" Kaveh asks.

"Or I'm ending this call and leaving you standing there in your underwear like a dumbass."

Kaveh scoffs. "So mean." He slips his hand under his briefs, palming his pelvis. "You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I think you're bluffing. You couldn't leave this call right now if you wanted to."

He slowly trails his hand over to his core, watching Alhaitham's expression carefully. When his hand finally brushes against his cock he lets out a breathy noise, and Alhaitham's lips fall open.

"What should I do next?" Kaveh whispers throatily.

"Take them off," Alhaitham instructs him.

Kaveh hums and doesn't listen. Instead he wraps his hand around his length, keening at the feeling of sweet pressure around his cock. His hand bulges out of his briefs as he strokes himself slowly.

"Kaveh," Alhaitham says firmly.

"What?"

"Take. Them. Off."

Kaveh moans. "Yes, *sir,"* he says, thumbing the elastic to slowly pull his underwear down. The moment his cock bobs free, Alhaitham takes in a sharp breath. Kaveh watches him reach down past the edge of the frame.

Kaveh comes in closer, leaning forward onto the desk so that his bare chest takes up most of the frame. "Do I get to see you?"

Alhaitham breathes heavily for a moment before scooting his chair back until Kaveh can see him rubbing himself through his pants.

"Mmm," Kaveh intones. "Are you going to take it out?"

"Eventually," Alhaitham replies. "Sit down. I want your full body in the frame."

Kaveh takes a moment to adjust his chair and camera. He leans back into the seat. "How's this?"

"You're perfect."

"Aww. You really think so?"

"I wouldn't change a thing," he replies. A little tingle of affection surges through Kaveh. "Touch yourself. Not your cock."

"Where do you want to touch me most?" Kaveh asks him.

"Your chest. And your shoulders."

Kaveh runs his hands over his skin. He traces his collarbones, presses his palms flat against his pecs. Alhaitham sighs softly. "I want to pull your hair," he says.

Kaveh turns his head to the side. He grabs the end of his ponytail and tilts his head back as he pulls. He lets out a little whimper.

"Take it out of the ponytail."

He slowly pulls it out, sliding the tie around his wrist. He starts to comb his fingers through his soft blonde locks, and Alhaitham grunts. "You like my hair?" Kaveh asks him softly.

"It's gorgeous," Alhaitham replies.

"Thank you," says Kaveh with a giggle. He combs it into three sections and starts to braid it loosely. "I love when guys play with my hair."

"I just want to run my fingers through it. I bet it's soft."

"It is," Kaveh confirms. "I take good care of it."

They just watch each other for a moment, Kaveh smiling softly and braiding his hair as Alhaitham grinds up into his hand.

"Hey, Kaveh," he said huskily.

Kaveh tilts his head. "Hmm?"

"I got something for you."

Leaning forward with a smirk, Kaveh says, "Let me see it, baby." Alhaitham slips his pants and underwear down, revealing his hard, full cock. Kaveh gasps and says, "Oh. *Oh."*

Alhaitham half-grins, looking smug. "Yeah."

"Impressive," Kaveh purrs. "Alhaitham, can I-?" His hands snake down

his chest. "Can I touch myself now?"

"You may."

Kaveh gently squeezes the base of his cock, his eyes fluttering shut. He lets out a little moan as he slowly strokes from base to tip. "Alhaitham-" he pants.

"Yeah, baby?"

"I want you inside me," he murmurs. "I want you buried in my ass so deep I can feel every inch of you."

"God, Kaveh-"

"Fuck me, please," he whines, speeding up. "Please, I need you, I need your cock-"

"Kaveh, fuck," Alhaitham groans. "I'll fill up that tight ass of yours."

"Yes, *yes,"* Kaveh says desperately.

"Say my name."

"Alhaitham."

"Scream it."

"Alhaitham!" he cries out. Fuck, he's already about to come. What an embarrassingly short timeline. He just wants it so much, and with all that teasing beforehand…

"I'm gonna come inside you," says Alhaitham, and that just pushes Kaveh straight over the edge.

His hips surge up in his chair, back arching as he spills come all over his hand. He moans the whole way though it, riding the little waves of pleasure throughout his entire body. Alhaitham grunts loudly, and Kaveh's eyes flick to the screen just in time to watch the come burst from his dick. He keens in his throat as another sharp pulse of pleasure goes through him. He pumps himself a couple of times slowly, milking out all his come.

They both pant over the call as they ride it out together. Kaveh whimpers through the aftershocks, still convulsing in his chair. God, he needed that. He just couldn't *take* the blue balls anymore.

Slowly, their breathing evens out. Kaveh smiles softly at the way Alhaitham's gaze travels over his body, like he still hasn't gotten enough of it. "Go clean up," Alhaitham instructs him. "Stay on the call."

"'Kay," Kaveh agrees easily.

He heads into the bathroom to wipe himself clean, then dresses in a fresh outfit. He fluffs his hair out a little, deciding to leave it hanging loose around his shoulders. He applies a little chapstick before heading back into the room and pulling his chair up to his desk.

Alhaitham is just sitting there as calmly as ever with a satisfied little smile on his face. Kaveh smiles back. "That was fun," he says.

"I'm recording you next time."

Kaveh gasps. "Naughty. Promise you won't upload it anywhere?"

"Why would I let anyone else see you like that?"

A warm spark shoots him. "Alhaitham," he says scandalously, "is this a marriage proposal?"

Alhaitham rolls his eyes and says, "Shut up." His expression turns serious for a moment. "You're not going to do this with anyone else, right?"

Kaveh shrugs non-committally. "I don't have any plans to."

"Don't," he says firmly.

"Careful, Alhaitham," he says warningly. "It's starting to sound like you're trying to get a commitment out of me."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "That's not what I'm saying."

"Really?" Kaveh raises a skeptical eyebrow.

"Just…" He huffs, and then his expression softens a little. "I like the way you make me feel."

"Okay, well, I liked it too," says Kaveh. "But you don't get to ban me from seeing other people."

Alhaitham frowns. "Not on video."

"That's not up to you."

"Kaveh," he says seriously.

"I can't make you that promise, Alhaitham," he insists. "Not after one naughty video call. You haven't made me yours, so you don't get to tell me I'm allowed to do."

Alhaitham's lips press into a thin line. Kaveh raises a challenging eyebrow.

"Fine," Alhaitham says shortly. "But you better pick up when I call you."

"If I'm not busy."

"Don't test me."

Kaveh can't help a little whine. Alhaitham gives him a knowing look, and Kaveh sighs. "I'll do my best," he offers.

Alhaitham tilts his head. "I guess that'll have to do." His tension eases, his shoulders dropping. "I'm going to sleep now."

"Okay. Sweet dreams." Kaveh gives him a little wave.

"Good night." He leaves the call, and the video cuts out.

Kaveh sighs to himself. He *is* into Alhaitham. Really into him. And he's very excited for these new developments. But that doesn't change the fact that he lives in fucking Philadelphia, and Kaveh would have to take a five-hour flight just to give him a kiss. He's not doing that for some guy. Not even an incredibly hot asshole who calls him perfect.

He whines a little in his throat. He sits up in his chair and moves his character in the game, dropping his AFK status. He plays for another couple of hours before logging out and crawling into bed, where he stares up at the ceiling and berates himself for feeling sad for forty-five minutes before finally turning over and going to sleep.

***

Tighnari is pipetting samples into a tray when his watch starts buzzing. He answers the call with his headset. "Hello, this is Tighnari."

"Ooh, you sound so professional."

He rolls his eyes. "Cyno, it's the middle of the work day. Why are you calling me?"

"The shop is slow, and I'm bored," he replies.

"Well, go dust something. I'm sure your nerdy little game shop has dust bunnies everywhere."

"How *dare* you," says Cyno, and Tighnari smiles to himself. "My shop is very clean. I pay a twelve-year-old to keep the displays all spic and span. Say hi, Collei."

"Hi, Tighnari!" says a bright voice into the speaker. "Cyno talks about you aaall the time."

"Okay, that's enough, demon child," Cyno says quickly.

Collei giggles, and Tighnari can't help laughing, too. "I'm pretty sure you're breaking some child labor laws, there," he points out.

"I pay her in Pokémon cards. She loves Pokémon. Even though I've explained to her a million times that TCG is a superior card game by every metric-"

"Pokémon are cute," says Collei.

Cyno sighs. "Okay, yeah, I guess Pokémon are pretty cute."

"I like Eevee the best."

"What's your favorite eeveelution?" Tighnari asks her.

"Vaporeon!" she screams. "Go water gun!"

Tighnari nods to himself, setting the pipette aside as he readies the tray for processing. "Good choice. Vaporeon is my favorite, too."

"See, Cyno? Vaporeon is better than Umbreon!"

"Stop filling my daughter's head with lies," Cyno tells him.

"You're not my dad," Collei says sassily.

"I'm your dad if your dad was cool."

"I want Tighnari to be my dad," says Collei. "Because he likes Vaporeon."

Cyno chuckles. "Well, I guess I'll have to marry him, then."

Tighnari chokes, nearly upending the tray. *"Cyno,"* he hisses. "You almost made me throw a tray of urine samples all over myself!"

"Ew, why are you sampling urine?" Cyno asks.

"I'm testing it for certain proteins," Tighnari explains, setting the tray down. "Which is my job, which is what I am *supposed* to be doing right now."

"Aw, okay. Be boring, then." Cyno huffs dramatically, then asks, "You gonna be on tonight?"

"Mmm… maybe," he replies.

"I'm not hanging up until you promise I get to see you tonight."

Tighnari smirks. "Guess I'll just have to hang up on you, then," he says, tapping to end the call. His music starts to play again, and he ignores the next call that comes through.

When he gets home he takes his time cooking dinner, smirking to himself at the thought of keeping Cyno waiting. He does a little light cleaning around the house and doesn't end up logging into Genshin until almost seven. Since Cyno is three hours ahead, it's nearly ten his time. As soon as his character loads in he gets a Discord call from Cyno. He lets it ring a few times before answering.

Finally he accepts, drawling, "Can I help you?" into his mic.

"I can't believe you just hung up on an innocent twelve-year-old girl!" Cyno exclaims immediately. "Collei was devastated. I spent all afternoon consoling her."

"Is that right?" Tighnari asks nonchalantly. He goes to check his mail. Some of his crafted gear sold, putting a nice sum of Mora into his pocket. The guild hall has actually been really useful.

"You're a cruel man, Nari," Cyno croons, and Tighnari bites his lower lip.

"You deserve it," he replies. "You want to run this stupid slime dungeon with me? Their shields are really annoying."

Cyno chuckles lowly. "Oh, Nari," he says, "you're not even going to apologize?"

"For what?"

"Breaking Collei's heart."

"Is it really Collei's heart I broke?" he asks.

"You break my heart every time you open your mouth," says Cyno.

Tighnari tsks. "You got a fragile heart, Cyno."

"You know I don't mind, right?" he says. "I'll just keep coming back every time you try to get rid of me."

"Just like herpes." He glances over at the server. "Looks like Kaveh's in chat. Want to invite him?"

"Sure. Let's pop in there."

Tighnari leaves the call and hops into the server chat. "'Sup, bitch?" he asks.

"Not much," Kaveh replies. "How 'bout you, bitch?"

"We're gonna run the gay slime dungeon. Wanna come, bitch?"

"Sure, bitch."

"Cool." He pauses for a moment before adding, "Bitch."

Kaveh snorts. "Your sheer hatred for everyone and everything on this planet is actually kind of funny sometimes," he comments.

"Hey, that's not fair!" says Cyno. "I'm supposed to be the funny one. Stop being funny, Nari."

"I'm not changing myself to fit your homophobic expectations," he replies.

"Homophobic?" Cyno repeats. "What?"

"'Cause I'm gay."

"Yeah, so?"

"That means anytime you criticize me you're being homophobic."

Cyno sputters. "Dude, I'm literally pansexual. I like cock, too."

"Well, then it's kind of hypocritical of you to be so homophobic, isn't it?"

"You're making zero fucking sense right now," Cyno says, laughing.

"Yeah, but you still think I'm cute," he replies.

"True."

"You know what," Kaveh says, "I think I finally understand what people mean when they say I'm too gay. Thank you, Tighnari."

"You're welcome, bitch."

Kaveh and Cyno both snort. Tighnari grins to himself.

They shoot the shit while playing through the dungeon. Cyno seems a little more subdued than usual. Tighnari wonders if it's because he's been teasing him too much. He does like Cyno, but he's already done the Genshin boyfriend thing, and that was a hot mess. He learned his lesson the first time.

He doubts Cyno is actually that serious about pursuing him, anyway. He hasn't started begging for nudes yet, but he probably will. Tighnari knows how this little song and dance goes. Once Cyno gets what he wants the attention will taper off and then stop. And Tighnari is kind of enjoying the attention, to be honest.

Ugh. This is stupid. If Tighnari is that horny, he should just go on an actual date. The problem is he's incredibly jaded, and he can't hide it. Tighnari has been hurt. He doesn't want to be hurt again. He'd rather go it alone. He just has to remember this when Cyno says things like *you make me nervous* and *I guess I'll have to marry him* because it's stupid shit like that that makes him forget.

Chapter End Notes

> Poor Cyno had no idea how much teasing he was signing himself up for. And look at Alhaitham and Kaveh getting SPICY. Things are heating up now, and they'll just keep getting hotter >:)
>
> Also jsyk the title of this chapter is directed at you personally. That's right, I'm throwing shade. You clicked on this fic, so don't try to tell me you don't deserve it.

Chapter 5: Let's Yeet This Little Vampire Bitch

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is what the M/F tag is for. I figured I should add it for reasons that will become clear. You came into this fic expecting gay smut and instead you get the gayest straight smut ever. Poor Sethos. Ssh it's okay, he has a good time. Don't worry about it.
>
> Discussion of depression + suicidality in this chapter as well. I'm sorry for what I've done to you Sethos I SWEAR THIS HAS A HAPPY ENDING!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Scara is having the time of his life teasing Sethos. It's hilarious—and maybe kind of mean, but Scara *is* kind of mean. And hey, he does intend to get the guy off eventually. That's not mean, right? In fact, it's a downright noble mission. Scara is performing a service for humanity, and women especially, because Sethos is going to make a very nice girl very happy someday. And he'll have Scara to thank for that.

"You okay?" he asks over the call. "You've been kinda quiet tonight."

Sethos huffs. "Yeah, and you know exactly why."

"Why?" Scara presses.

"'Cause you're being all-" He sighs into his mic. "You said you'd give me time."

"Yeah, and it's been three weeks! Don't you think I deserve a reward for being so patient?"

"I'm sorry," Sethos says immediately.

"Don't apologize," Scara chides him. "You promised me you'd stop doing that."

"Yeah, and you promised me you'd be gentle."

"I am being gentle!" Scara protests. "I'm not even spamming you with pictures of my tits. Do you know how hard that is for me? Do you

understand how much self-restraint that requires?"

Sethos lets out a strangled, exasperated noise. "Just find somebody else, then!"

"I don't want somebody else."

"You don't want me, either," Sethos says darkly. "You're just doing this for a laugh."

Scara lets out a little hum. "Sethos," he says in a soft voice. "Where is all this coming from, huh? Why are you always so down on yourself?"

Sethos sighs heavily. "Don't make fun of me when I tell you this, okay?"

"I would never make fun of you."

"Okay, you literally do it all the time," Sethos says flatly.

Scara giggles and says, "Maybe. But I won't this time, I swear."

He sighs again. Whatever he's about to say, it's important. Scara had better pay attention. "When I was in high school, we had this dance. It was called MORP. It's the opposite of prom, so the girl is supposed to ask the guy."

"Oh, no," Scara says. "This is to going to be a bad story, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He exhales softly. "There was this one girl at my school. She was really popular, super pretty. Literally everyone was in love with her, me included. We were lab partners in chemistry, and I couldn't even talk to her all year. I got so nervous around her. It was really obvious that I liked her."

Scara silently waits for him to continue.

"So one day, a couple weeks before the dance, she… got on one knee in the hallway with a bouquet of roses and asked me to go with her. I was so happy. I couldn't actually get out the word 'yes' because I still couldn't even talk to her, but I nodded, and…" He pauses again.

"And then what?" Scara prompts.

Sethos' voice is utterly dejected as he says, "A bunch of poppers started going off. Confetti and crap. And then suddenly everyone was laughing at me and holding up all these banners that said 'LOSER' on

them. She stood up and said, 'I would never dance with a loser like you,' then she threw the roses on the ground and stomped on them. And I just stood there in the middle of the hallway wishing I was dead."

Scara bites his lower lip. Well, what the hell is he supposed to say to that? "What a cruel thing to do," he murmurs.

Sethos laughs bitterly. "Yeah. So." He clears his throat. "I don't know. It was, like, eleven years ago. I guess I should be over it by now."

"It's not that simple," Scara tells him. "Some things leave a scar on you. They change the way you think about yourself, and that's powerful. No one can expect you to just get over that."

"My parents did. And Cyno does. He thinks I'm crazy for letting something that happened so long ago affect me so much."

"Okay, look, I know you love Cyno, but let's be honest—he's a dumbass. I doubt he knows the first thing about trauma."

"Well, it wasn't *traumatic,"* Sethos says hesitantly.

"Are you serious?"

"I mean- like- *war* is traumatic. Abuse is traumatic! I just got rejected by a girl."

"Sethos," Scara says seriously, "Listen to me very carefully: You were targeted by an incredibly vicious prank and humiliated in front of your peers when you were just a teenager. It was a formative experience at a vulnerable time in your life. Of *course* it was traumatic. Of course it still affects you! God, Sethos, you're lucky you're not fucking *dead."*

"Wha-?" Sethos stutters. "What do you mean?"

Scara's brows pull together. This is genuinely upsetting him. "You said you wished you were dead."

"Well… yeah," he admits.

"For how long? How long did you wish you were dead?"

"Uh. I don't know, like… a few years?"

"Did you ever get help?" Scara asks him. "Did you ever *tell* anyone?"

"I- I- Well, what was I supposed to tell them?" he says desperately. "That a girl rejected me, and I was sad about it? Come on. It's so frickin' stupid-"

"Stop calling yourself stupid!" Scara says firmly, raising his voice. "You were depressed. You were suicidal. You weren't stupid then, and you're not stupid now. The only *stupid* thing here is the way you're blaming yourself for not moving past your own trauma when you were never given the tools or the support to do so! What were you supposed to do? Just- Oh, just *stop* being depressed. Just *get over it.* That's some bullshit. You needed help, and no one helped you. You went through all of that alone, and the fact that you're still here right now is a testament to how strong and resilient you are. So don't you *dare* call yourself stupid. Stop being a dick to yourself and instead be proud that you made it through all that, because I will tell you right now, a lot of people wouldn't have."

The line is silent when he finishes. Scara breathes heavily, his voice thick with emotion. He… did manage to keep the girl voice up during that rant, didn't he? Maybe it slipped a little at the end. Hopefully Sethos didn't notice.

Honestly, shit like that really just pisses him off. When people gatekeep trauma, when they say there's no reason to be depressed so you just shouldn't be. That's not helpful. He hated when people would tell him to just go outside or go to the gym or whatever random shit. That's not what he needed to hear when he was struggling. What he needed to hear was that he wasn't alone and that this state of mind was temporary. That it wouldn't last forever. That he was capable of getting through it with just a little help.

Sethos didn't have any of that. He just suffered, and he's still suffering. Fuck, it makes Scara so *angry* that no one in his life ever saw what he was going through. That no one ever helped him. What kind of fucking cretins has Sethos surrounded himself with? Oh, Scara is going to have *words* with Cyno.

"I'm sorry," Sethos says weakly. "I didn't mean to make you mad."

Scara takes in a deep breath, then lets it out. "I'm not mad at you," he says, making sure he's using his softest, sweetest girl voice. "I'm just mad that nobody helped you."

"I didn't need help."

"Sethos," he says in a gentle but warning tone. "I know you wouldn't

dare lie to me."

Sethos lets out soft breath. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, honey," he tells him. *"I'm* sorry for yelling. That shit just gets me all worked up."

"Did you, um… did you go through something like that?"

Scara huffs. "Yeah, something like that," he says. "But we're not talking about me right now. We're talking about you. Did you ever get therapy?"

"I don't need therapy," Sethos protests. "Everybody gets sad sometimes."

"Sure," Scara agrees, "but getting so sad that you wish you were dead for several years is not a thing most people go through."

"I'm fine now," he insists. "I got through college and dental school, and I have my own practice! I'm doing really good."

"Except you still can't talk to girls."

"Pfff," Sethos huffs into his microphone, "I'm talking to you right now."

Scara smiles softly. "Sethos. Relationships are an important social connection. You've never had one, right?"

"I, um- No," he admits.

"But you want to."

He hesitates before saying, "I mean, yeah-"

"And how do you plan on doing that when you can't even talk to women without freaking out?"

"I- I don't know. I'll figure it out."

"Let me help you."

Sethos is quiet for a moment before saying softly, "Um, how?"

"I'll show you what to do. It's just a phone call, right? You don't even have to see me or touch me. Just talk to me, and I'll talk to you."

"You mean, like… dirty talk, though, right?"

"It doesn't have to be dirty," Scara says gently. "Just try to talk to me without stuttering and saying 'um' every other word."

"Sorry."

"And *without* apologizing," he adds more sternly.

"Right. Yeah." He hears Sethos take a deep breath. "I'll do my best."

"That's all I ask," says Scara. "And one more thing."

"Sure. What is it?"

"Just think about getting therapy. It'll help you process everything and figure out how to move forward."

"I… I'll think about it," he says eventually.

"Okay. Thank you."

Sethos huffs a little. "Thanks, Scara."

He suddenly feels a lump in his throat and has to swallow around it. "Anytime," he whispers.

They hang up the call a few minutes later. Scara's blood is still a little hot. It's not even really about Sethos. Scara has a lot of empathy for what he went through, but right now he's mostly thinking about himself.

The thing is, no one ever helped him, either. He had to figure it out on his own, and it was awful. Back when he was homeless, it felt like all the hope and joy had been sucked out of the world. It felt like things were never going to get better.

He really just got lucky with that Walmart job because he'd managed to grab a shower the day before and some clean clothes from the donation bin. He saw the hiring sign and thought, *I need a way out.* So he asked for an application, they interviewed him on the spot, and then he started work the next day. He just happened to be in the right place at the right time when they really needed someone.

He would go to the bank and cash his check every two weeks, and eventually he had enough for a deposit on an apartment. They definitely overcharged him because he had shit credit from his

defaulted student loans and could only pay in cash, but he managed alright. He got on state insurance and finally was able to go to therapy. That was when things really started to turn around.

Scara didn't even realize how bad things were until he started explaining it to the therapist. That kind of opened his eyes about what he was going through, and he realized it was going to take a lot of hard work to get better. So Scara put in the work whenever he could, and it wasn't 100% all the time, but it eventually paid off.

Yeah, maybe he still doesn't live in the best part of town. And his job is literally getting off gooners with his fake girl voice. But hey, that's a lot better than where he started. Scara is good with the way things are. He can afford a place to live and food to eat, and he doesn't wake up every day choked in a fog of hopelessness. That's pretty damn good, in his book.

In a way, Scara feels like he *has* to help Sethos just to make up for the fact that no one really helped him. He did it all pretty much by himself. He doesn't want Sethos to go through that. Scara doesn't believe for a minute that his trauma is in the past. It's still affecting him, and he's still struggling. So Scara will help. Scara will support Sethos the way no one ever supported him.

He takes a little break for a couple hours, scrolling through TikTok to reset his mood and distract himself for a little while. Eventually he ends up lying in bed with his phone charging, pursing his lips and wondering, *How the hell am I going to pull this off?*

***

Raid night that Saturday is painful. Sethos is struggling, and he keeps wiping the raid. He can hear everyone getting annoyed with him, even though no one yells. They've been at this for weeks, and they still can't clear the first boss on hardcore.

"Frick! Ah, I'm sorry." He sighs deeply as all his teammates die again. "You know what? Just kick me. I'm clearly not going to get it, and I'm holding you guys back."

No one says anything for a moment before Scara's voice comes through. "Hey, boys, can you give us a minute? I'll call you, Sethos."

He purses his lips. "Okay," he says, leaving the chat. He stares at the screen for a moment before the call from Scara comes through. He picks up.

"Sethos," she says in that sweet, pretty voice. "Honey, what's wrong?"

He sighs. "I just know I messed things up with you. I shouldn't have whined about all my problems-"

"Hey, no, I'm glad you told me," she says softly. "It helped me understand you better. I think I know what you need."

"What?" he asks her.

"Do you masturbate?"

Sethos' cheeks flush a deep red. "I-I- um-" he stutters uselessly.

"Do you?" she presses.

He exhales. "Yes," he admits quietly.

"Do you watch porn?"

"No!" he exclaims.

"Okay, tell me what you usually do. Do you look at pictures? Do you think about something in particular?"

"Scara," he whines. "I can't- Gah, this is so embarrassing."

"Just tell me. I'm not going to judge you for it."

Sethos takes a deep breath. He knows she won't. As much as Scara teases him, she's actually a really nice girl. He can trust her. "I just… visualize, I guess?"

"Go lie down in bed."

Sputtering, Sethos says, "Wha- Why?"

"I'm going to talk you through it," she says.

His flush deepens. He wants to protest, but he has no words. Ugh! Why does he always get so tongue-tied?

"You don't have to say anything," she goes on. "Just listen to my voice and do whatever you normally do. Okay?"

Sethos shakes his head firmly, even though she can't see him. There's *no way* he can do that.

"Sethos," she says in a warning tone. "You can do this. Go lie down."

He whimpers. He… does want to. He *really* wants to. She said he doesn't have to talk. He wouldn't even be capable of talking. But he can't just… just *masturbate* while she's listening.

"Trust me." Her voice is gentle again, soft and melodic. "You need this. Just let me help you."

Sethos squeezes his eyes shut tight. Every fiber of his being wants this right now. He's so turned on even thinking about it. Maybe he could just…? He has her permission, right? So it's okay. It's so dirty, though. He can't. He *shouldn't.*

"Are you ready?"

Arousal shoots through Sethos. He flies out of his office chair, shoving it away and flopping onto the bed. "Yes," he squeaks quietly.

"It's a quiet night and you're just lying in bed, resting. There's nothing you need to do right now. You've completed all your responsibilities for today, and now it's time to relax. Take a moment to get comfortable. Adjust the pillows if you need to. Make sure your neck is supported. Soften the tension in your face, letting it settle into a serene expression. Close your eyes and take a deep breath."

Sethos follows her instructions, propping his pillow against the headboard so he's half sitting up. He settles in and relaxes his face, letting his eyes fall closed.

"Good," Scara says a moment later. "As you're lying there relaxing, you hear the front door open. You hear me come inside the house, my keys clinking as I set them down. You listen to me walk around, get a glass of water, and take my shoes off. I'm coming home to you after a long day, and there's nowhere else I'd rather be."

Sethos breathes in carefully, imagining the scenario she's describing. It's not how he was expecting this to go but… he decides to trust her.

"I appear in the doorway to the bedroom. You see me standing there in my blazer and pencil skirt, my hair all tightly wound up. I approach the bed slowly, unbuttoning my blazer as I go. Underneath it, you can see a hint of red lace."

Sethos sucks in a sharp breath. The image is a little hazy since he doesn't know what she looks like, but he can picture it easily enough.

He focuses on her voice, waiting to see what happens next.

"I take off the blazer. I'm wearing lingerie just for you because I know how much you like it. The cups of the bra hug my curves, the red standing out starkly against my pale skin. I start to unzip my skirt and slide it down my legs. My lacy red panties match, and a garter belt holds up my stockings. As you look closer, you see a wet stain that tells you I've been thinking about you all day."

Sethos is breathing shakily now. He aches to touch himself, but he waits. He continues to listen to her narration.

"I take my hair clip out, shaking my head until my hair hangs loose around my face. I put my hands on the bed and lean in, crawling forward until I'm positioned directly over you. I take your hands and hold them to my breasts. You cup them in your palms and squeeze. I throw my head back and moan. 'Mmm. That feels so good, Sethos.'"

He can't take it anymore. His hand slips down his pants, sliding around his leaking cock. He strokes slowly, hanging on her every word.

"You reach back and unhook my bra. My breasts spill out. You take each nipple into your mouth, and I sigh above you. 'Don't tease me, Sethos. I need you inside me.'"

Sethos lets out a little whimper. This is *filthy*. He should be embarrassed, but he isn't. He's enjoying it way too much.

"You can't deny me anything. You take off your shirt, and I run my hands over your chest. I position myself above you and undo your pants. I reach inside and take you into my hand, stroking you slowly but firmly. Then I pull aside my panties and sink onto your cock."

Sethos grunts. He just can't hold it in. He's never been so turned on before.

"I'm so wet, you slide right in. As you sheathe yourself fully inside me, I moan. 'Ah, *Sethos!'* I put my hands on your shoulders and grind against you. I shuffle forward and back, pushing your cock even deeper inside me. Then I start to move up and down, your cock sliding in and out of me."

"Ah," Sethos murmurs quietly. He starts to stroke himself faster. He's not going to last much longer.

"Suddenly, you grab my hips and start to thrust up into me. Your cock slams into my wet pussy, and I scream, 'Ah-ah-ah! You feel so good, Sethos. I want you to come inside me!'"

Sethos grunts desperately as he spills over into his hand, breathing heavily against his mic. That was… *fuck*. Yes, it's worth the swear. He whimpers as he squeezes the last of the fluid out of his cock.

Scara's soft voice continues, "After your come fills me up, I lean forward and press a kiss to your lips. You always satisfy me so well. Why would I ever want anyone else?"

Sethos' heart is still pounding in his chest. It takes him a moment to catch his breath. He looks at his hand, wincing at the sticky mess.

"Go clean yourself up," says Scara. "Rejoin the voice chat when you're ready to kick some ass." She ends the call.

He squeezes his eyes shut. Right. The raid. Sethos has to go in there and play. He feels a surge of confidence. He can do it. He's *got* this.

He quickly cleans up and gets back into his chair. He joins the chat.

"Hey," Alhaitham greets him. "You good?"

Sethos cracks his neck. "I'm ready. Let's yeet this little vampire bitch."

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"6%!" Kaveh calls out. "Get ready for the coffin mechanic!"

"We've so got his ass," says Tighnari. "Get in position for roots!"

Everyone snaps to their positions. A coffin rises from the center of the arena, and the boss calls out his voice line and turns into mist. Tighnari lets off his cast, and roots crawl up from the ground to encase their characters, increasing their damage resistance.

"First wave," says Alhaitham.

A huge burst of AOE damage hits them all, halving their HP. Cyno watches his bar jump back up as Tighnari lets off his burst heal.

"Second wave, divine shield," Alhaitham calls out next.

That's Cyno's ability. His pulse bulges in his neck as slams the hotkey, protecting them with divine light. Even with the mitigation, their HP

drops quickly. Tighnari heals them back up.

"Third wave, battle aria and moon's blessing!"

Sethos plays his flute, and Tighnari calls on the power of the moon.

"3%!" Kaveh screams. "We got this, we got this!"

"Last wave," Alhaitham calls out. "Pop veil and then stack on his ass!"

Alhaitham and Kaveh both use their abilities. Cyno hears Tighnari suck in a breath as they all drop to 1 HP. "Go, go, go!" Tighnari screams. They all rush into melee range, and flowers bloom beneath their fleet. "Stay in the flowers, or I castrate you!"

"Cyno, get ready for adds!" Alhaitham orders. "Keep DPS on the boss!"

"TWO FUCKING PERCENT!"

As soon as the research subjects start throwing themselves at the party, Cyno uses his taunt. He slams down a holy circle and two different shields. "Keep me up, baby!" he says to Tighnari.

"I've got you!" Tighnari replies. "Three seconds on moonlight!"

"BURN THIS FUCKER!" Kaveh screams.

Cyno watches his health dip, then soar back up when Tighnari shines a moonbeam down on him. It'll increase his incoming healing for a few seconds. He pops every single one of his self-heals. His HP bar swings up and down wildly as the research subjects attack him, but he stays up.

"One percent, one percent-" Scara chants.

"Fuck!" Alhaitham yells as he goes down.

"Sorry!" Tighnari yelps. "I almost had you."

"Hold the res," he orders. "Come on, come on!"

"Goddamn stupid fucking dark mist!" Tighnari yells.

"I've got ballad!" Sethos calls.

"Use it, use it!" Tighnari screams frantically. Sethos' song comes out. "Yes, yes- NOT ON MY WATCH, MOTHERFUCKER!"

The second Cyno dies Tighnari picks him back up. It's not fast enough to stop the adds from killing Scara, then Kaveh. Cyno manages to quickly round them all up again.

"FINISH HIM!" Kaveh screeches.

Spikes start dropping from the ceiling. Tighnari gets hit by one and screams in rage. Without his healing, the adds kill Cyno again pretty quickly.

"Get him, cousin!" Cyno calls out.

"Fuck him up!" Scara shrieks. "Come on, baby, come on-"

The entire raid team goes wild as Sethos' last arrow finally finishes off the boss. Cyno pumps his fist. Fuck, he *knew* Sethos could do it. Boy just needed a little motivation.

"Sethos, my man!" Cyno calls out. "You're a legend!"

"Mmm, that was hot," Scara purrs.

"Sethos is a beast!" Alhaitham chants.

Sethos laughs wildly. "Thanks, guys," he says, and Cyno can hear the bright smile in his voice. "It was a team effort."

Once the rest of the group resurrects, they gather around Sethos and blow kisses at him, throwing confetti and waving glow sticks. Sethos keeps laughing and telling them to stop. They all get a group photo and then roll for loot.

"I got a 90 on the chest piece," Cyno brags.

"Oh, fuck you," says Tighnari.

"If any of you roll above an 84 on the boots, I will murder you in your sleep," says Scara sweetly. Cyno ends up with the chest piece, and Scara cheers when she gets the boots. "Looks like you all get to live another day, boys."

"Good work, team," says Alhaitham. "We still got twenty minutes. Why don't we try the next one?"

"I can probably clear it by myself," says Sethos. "I'm feeling good tonight."

"Everybody give Scara kisses in chat," Kaveh orders. "She is now a deity."

"Awww," Scara coos as the various gifs and emojis start to stack up. "Thank you, boys. But I'm not kissing any of you back."

"Not even me?" Sethos asks.

She chuckles. "You already got yours."

"Ayyy," Cyno whoops. "Attaboy!"

They all roll up to the next raid, but they don't make much progress. None of them are bothered, too high off their win to care. They fuck around and laugh and have a great time. This is what Cyno loves about raiding. This is a good group, and he's glad he took that chance when Alhaitham invited him.

People start signing off as the session ends. Alhaitham and Kaveh are the first to go, then Scara. Sethos stays for a minute, still chattering excitedly. Cyno smiles as he listens. Eventually Sethos heads out, and then leaves Cyno with Tighnari.

"Big win for him tonight, huh?" Tighnari says.

Cyno smiles as he leans back in his chair. "Yeah. I knew he'd get there eventually. He just needed a little boost."

"Sounds like she gave him one. What do you think they got up to?"

"Why?" Cyno asks him. "You thinking of taking some notes?"

Tighnari chuckles. "Don't get your hopes up, Cyno. I'll only let you down."

"Aw, come on." Cyno's chair creaks as he shifts. "How long are you gonna keep this up?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, how long are you gonna play hard to get?" he clarifies.

"Until you give up," says Tighnari.

Cyno smirks and says, "Oh, that's not gonna happen."

"No?"

"Nope."

Tighnari is quiet for a moment. "You're bluffing."

"I'm not," Cyno assures him.

"You are," Tighnari insists. "You'll get bored of me eventually."

"Baby, you couldn't bore me if you tried."

Tighnari hums and says, "I'm not your baby."

"Not yet."

He lets out a little laugh. "I know how this works, Cyno."

Cyno raises an eyebrow. "Do you?" he asks.

"Mhmm. I can spot a liar from miles away."

"I'm not a liar!" Cyno protests. "I'm a *paladin."*

"Shut up."

"No," Cyno replies. He leans forward onto his elbows. "I can keep this up longer than you can. Eventually I'll annoy you so much that you give me what I want just to shut me up."

"And what do you want, Cyno?" Tighnari asks him.

That's a good question, actually. Even Cyno doesn't have an answer to that. He's not quite sure what he wants from Tighnari. At first Cyno just went after him because he was cute and kind of feral, but the more Cyno talks to him, the more he likes him. He's kinda sweet underneath all that snarling and snapping. He seems like a genuinely good person, and those are rare.

Cyno would like to say he's a good person himself, but sometimes he's not too sure. He does his best, but he doesn't always get it right. He doesn't want Tighnari to think he's just looking to mess around. Not that Cyno is *opposed* to messing around if that's all he can get, but that's not what he's after.

Cyno is at the point in his life now where he just wants to find his person. It's too soon to tell whether or not Tighnari is his person or if he could be someday. That's why Cyno wants to get with him, so he can find out. Sexual chemistry is important to him, and there's no

point chasing after someone he doesn't click with. He just feels like it would be *good* with Tighnari. He's exactly the right mixture of cute and bratty. That, and Cyno really wants to see him naked.

Since there's no way he can just say all that, Cyno decides to go with, "I want you."

Tighnari hums. "That's not an answer, Cyno."

"I know." He bites his lower lip. "Just let me have a taste."

"Just a taste, huh?"

"Yeah. Come on," Cyno wheedles him.

"Hmm…" Cyno waits with bated breath for his response. "Okay."

"Sweet! What do I get?"

"I'll send you a photo."

"Ooh-*hoo,* okay." Cyno rubs his hands together.

He gets a ping from Tighnari. He opens the photo, and… it takes his breath away. Tighnari is in a pair of overall shorts in the middle of a field of sunflowers. He has his head dipped down toward one, cupping the flower as he breathes it in.

"What do you think?" Tighnari asks him.

"I…" Cyno sucks in a shaky breath.

"Cyno? Did I break you?"

"No," he says quickly. "No."

Tighnari chuckles. "Aw. Are you disappointed?"

Cyno shakes his head, taking in the details of the picture. "No," he says softly. "Not at all."

"Oh. Well." Tighnari clears his throat. "Maybe that'll tide you over for awhile."

"Yeah," Cyno agrees.

"Anyway. Good night, loser."

"Night, Nari."

Tighnari leaves the voice chat. Cyno just stares at the picture for several more long seconds before he manages to shake himself. "Shit," he whispers.

He logs off and goes to bed. When he finally gets to sleep, he dreams of sunflowers.

Chapter End Notes

> Tell Sethos to go to therapy in the comments, maybe he will agree if enough people scream at him. That's how you convince people to get therapy, right? Screaming at them? ...No?

Chapter 6: You're Looking Real Fucking Desperate Over Here, Just So You Know

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Dude, why aren't you using your burst?" Alhaitham demands. He gets another kill on the rogue and grins ferally. "Take that, you backstabbing bitch."

"They're not grouped!" Kaveh complains.

"Stop waiting for the perfect moment and just use it." Kaveh's demonic circle goes out, hitting absolutely no one. Alhaitham groans. "Nice job, dumbass."

"You told me to use it!"

Alhaitham rolls his eyes. "Yeah, but you have to hit *somebody* with it."

"Well, you were stressing me out!" he whines.

"It's fine, it's not even ranked," says Alhaitham.

"Then stop yelling at me!"

"I'm not yelling," Alhaitham points out. "You're the one who's yelling."

Kaveh huffs and says, "I hate playing PVP with you."

"Then why did you agree to play?" Alhaitham asks him. He grabs two people with his explosive trap, and his eyes gleam. He's wrecking these fucking losers.

"Because I wanted to play with you!" Kaveh lets out another scream as he dies.

"Why do you want to play with me if you hate playing with me?" Alhaitham asks. "That doesn't make any sense."

"'Cause I like for you some stupid fucking reason," Kaveh snaps.

"Sounds like a you problem." His nostrils flare as the rogue backstabs him again. "Oh, that was a mistake." Now that he's in melee range

Alhaitham can fire an explosive round right in his face. He dies yet again, and Alhaitham lets out a sharp, "Ha! That's right, bitch."

Kaveh lets out a long, dramatic groan. "Alhaitham," he said in clear exasperation. "Can you stop fucking the rogue for a second?"

"No," he replies.

A message comes through on Discord. Alhaitham glances over at it, and his eyes widen. It's a photo of Kaveh pulling his hair back as he stares into the camera mid-gasp. Alhaitham almost dies because he's not paying attention, and he swears loudly.

"Don't distract me," he snaps.

"Alhaitham," Kaveh whines.

"Don't say my name like that," Alhaitham warns him.

Kaveh starts moaning over the mic. "Alhaitham," he says again.

"Shut up, or I'm muting you."

"You wouldn't *dare."*

Alhaitham tabs over to mute him. It's blessedly silent as he continues to wipe the floor with the enemy players. Since it's an unranked match the win doesn't really count for anything, but Alhaitham is not about to lose to these fuckers. The match ends a couple minutes later, and he goes back to Discord to unmute Kaveh.

"You still there?" he asks.

"I can't *believe* you," Kaveh starts venomously. "See if I ever get you off again."

"What are you making threats for?" Alhaitham asks him. "We both know you're horny enough to give me whatever I want at the drop of a hat."

Kaveh scoffs. "Dick."

"That what you want? Huh?" Alhaitham's hand travels southward as he looks at the picture Kaveh sent.

It's quiet for a moment before Kaveh whimpers over the call. "You're so mean," he complains.

"You like it," Alhaitham says confidently.

"No!" Kaveh protests. "I'm not giving you shit after you muted me. Go beat your meat in silence, asshole." He leaves the call.

Alhaitham grunts in frustration. Things have been a little weird with Kaveh lately. He's just acting erratic, hot one minute and cold the next. Alhaitham doesn't know what the fuck he wants. Kaveh admitted he's been thirsting after Alhaitham for over a year. So why is he acting like this? All the sassiness, the way he'll get Alhaitham worked up and then leave him hanging. He's playing games, and Alhaitham doesn't like it.

He needs to lay down the law. He needs to explain to Kaveh how this is going to go, and Kaveh needs to actually fucking listen for once and do what he says. That's what Kaveh really wants.

…Right?

He types out a message over Discord.

Alhaitham: What makes you think I'm not going to get off to you anyway? You think your little tantrum will stop me?

Kaveh: You don't deserve me

Alhaitham: Yet you're sitting there horny for me anyway
Alhaitham: Give it up, Kaveh. I know you want it

Kaveh: I don't need you

Alhaitham: You do

Kaveh: No I don't. I'm hot and single in Orange County, all I have to do to catch a dick is walk outside

Alhaitham: Then go do it if that's what you want

Kaveh: Fuck you

Alhaitham: Send me another pic

Kaveh: No!

Alhaitham: I'm not asking

Kaveh: Fuck you you piece of shit you have no right to demand

anything from me if you want me that bad then you can at least PAY ATTENTION to me I don't deserve to be treated like this and I won't let you use me!!

Alhaitham frowns. This isn't going how he intended at all. He starts a call. It rings for several seconds, but Kaveh doesn't answer.

Alhaitham: Pick up
Alhaitham: Kaveh pick up the call
Alhaitham: Please pick up

It stops ringing. Alhaitham immediately clicks to call him again, and Kaveh finally picks up.

"What do you want, huh?" Kaveh demands, not giving Alhaitham half a second to answer. "Why don't you just hire a whore if all you want is some bitch who does everything you say?"

"Kaveh-" he starts, but Kaveh immediately interrupts him.

"You can't even admit you like me!" he screams. "We were friends, and now you just treat me like I'm disposable! And then you try to demand things from me like I'll just drop everything for some guy who lives, like, three thousand miles away when I can't even fucking kiss your stupid, beautiful face, all I get is your voice, and what, I'm just supposed to be okay with that? It's not fair, all my friends are either married or fucking a new hot twenty-something every weekend, and I'm just here begging for scraps from some asshole who I've never even met who insists he doesn't have feelings for me, and yeah, okay, maybe that's my fault for chasing after an emotionally unavailable dickhead but I can't help that I'm fucking in love with you, and you don't even care *at all-"*

"I love you, too."

Kaveh halts in the middle of his rant. Alhaitham's heart pounds in his chest, and every thump is painful.

"I like the way you make me feel," Alhaitham goes on, "but I also really fucking hate it. It scares the shit out of me. I've never felt anything like this before, Kaveh. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't know how to act around you. I just know you're way more experienced than I am with this kind of thing, and I fucking *hate* that because I should be the one chasing you because that's what you deserve, but I *can't* because I'm fucking *broken,* and I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do about that!"

The line is silent for a moment. "I'm sorry," Kaveh says at last, "I didn't hear anything past 'I love you.' Do you- Do you mean it? Because if you don't-"

"I mean it," Alhaitham assures him. "Maybe I've never been in love before, but I'm not completely hopeless."

Kaveh lets out a wet laugh.

"Are you crying?" Alhaitham asks.

"Shut up," Kaveh says weakly.

A little smile pulls at the corner of Alhaitham's mouth. "I'm not making fun of you."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm not," he says softly. He frowns to himself. "I know that's, uh… not what you were expecting to hear tonight-"

"No," Kaveh laughs. "No, it wasn't." Another moment passes before Kaveh clears his throat. "How long have you been in love with me?"

Alhaitham sighs, leaning back in his chair. "I don't know," he says honestly. "I was reading a book the other day."

"A book?" Kaveh repeats.

"Yeah. It was about, like, connecting with your emotions or some shit." He huffs. "I've been reading some self-help stuff. I figured since I didn't even know what a crush felt like, there was probably a bunch of other stuff I didn't know. So I thought I should learn. I kind of… fell down a rabbit hole."

Kaveh chuckles over the line. "Did you?"

"Yeah," he admits. "The book was saying something about how the most important part of emotional regulation is acknowledging what you're feeling. I started doing some of the exercises. It, uh… it wasn't easy. But I realized I felt a lot more than I thought I did, I just never really acknowledged it. I don't think this is the first time I've had a crush on someone. I think I've just never really been as comfortable with anybody as I am with you. I do this thing where I tune shit out. If it doesn't seem relevant, I don't pay attention. But talking to you, it's like… I don't know, I feel safe enough to actually stop and pay

attention."

Kaveh doesn't say anything for a long minute. Alhaitham's brow furrows tightly.

"I'm sorry, I know this isn't what you like-" he starts, but he doesn't get to finish

"What?" Kaveh blurts. "What, why would I not like you baring your soul to me?"

He frowns. "Because you want someone to dominate you."

Kaveh makes a strangled noise into his mic. "Yeah, in *bed!"* he squeals. "That doesn't mean I want you to be an ass to me 24/7!"

"Oh," says Alhaitham, blinking. "Hmm."

"Oh, my God," Kaveh groans. "You fucking moron. That's why you were treating me like shit?"

"Yeah," Alhaitham admits.

Kaveh starts to cackle. "Oh, my God," he says again between peals of laughter. "Oh, Alhaitham, you are *killing me."*

"Well, you're always such a brat," Alhaitham points out. "I thought that was, like, your kink."

"You… dumb… motherfucker," Kaveh gasps.

"Shut up."

"I can't believe this," he goes on. "I cannot believe-" He at last manages to catch his breath. "Alhaitham, I love you, but you are so fucking stupid."

"You never explained!" Alhaitham clarified. "You went on and on about that one guy who spanked you and called you his slut-"

"In bed!" he screeches. "In *bed,* Alhaitham!"

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?" he shouts back.

He's not really angry, though, is the thing. Ever since Kaveh said he was in love with him, Alhaitham has felt that floaty, tingly feeling. He likes it. Now that he knows he's not dying, he likes it a lot. He smiles

stupidly at his monitor.

"So will you promise not to video call other guys now?" Alhaitham asks him.

"Well, that depends," Kaveh says, all sass. "Are you going to ask me to be your boyfriend?"

"Kaveh, will you be my boyfriend?"

"Mmm…" Kaveh hums, dragging out the sound. "Okay."

Alhaitham feels a surge of warmth in his chest. "Good," he says. It's quiet over the call for a moment before he says, "So do you want to get on video?"

Kaveh lets out a sultry little chuckle. "Sure. I'll let you be mean to me for a little while. But in a sexual context only, to be clear."

"Sounds good."

Alhaitham switches his webcam on, and Kaveh does the same. Alhaitham smiles softly at him for a moment. He wasn't really sure until he said it, but… he does love Kaveh. He's not sure how it's going to work with them being so far apart, but it doesn't matter. Alhaitham can love him from anywhere on the planet. A few thousand miles isn't going to stop him.

His smile twists into a smirk. "Strip," he orders.

***

The last raid boss for this tier is a flying wind beast, and it's super fucking gay.

"I hate this cocksucker!" Tighnari screams as he goes flying off the edge of the arena for what feels like the hundredth time. He clenches his fists, pounding them onto the desk's wooden surface.

"Yeah, I kinda think he hates you, too," says Alhaitham. "Reset." He turns and jumps off the platform.

"No, Alhaitham!" Kaveh cries out. "You have so much to live for!"

"If your friends all jumped off a cliff, would you jump too?" asks Sethos.

"Yep!" Cyno declares. "Cowabunga!"

"Valid," says Sethos, throwing himself off after his cousin.

Scara and Kaveh jump after them, and the fight resets. There's no point trying to get through the next phase without a healer, and Tighnari *keeps* dying to this stupid mechanic. It fills him with burning rage every time.

"I don't get it!" he rants, throwing his hands up. "I had the buff!"

"I think this guy's just racist," says Kaveh.

"What?" Tighnari asks.

"'Cause he's a bird, and you're a fox," he explains. "His entire family was hunted down by foxes, and this is his revenge."

"Interesting theory," says Scara. "But I'm pretty sure it's because you don't have him targeted when he finishes the cast."

Tighnari frowns. "Why would I have to have him targeted?"

"Because the buff ties you to him," she says. "You're probably just getting tied to whoever you're targeting."

"That's bullshit!" he exclaims. "If I'm tied to Cyno, and Cyno is tied to the boss, I should be safe!"

"That might be it, actually," says Alhaitham. "Try it next time."

To Tighnari's utter disbelief and wrath, it turns out that Scara's theory is correct. "That's so fucking *stupid,"* he complains.

"Well, at least we figured it out," Kaveh reasons. "Thanks, Scara."

"Anytime," she replies. "I've got about twenty more minutes, by the way."

Tighnari groans. "You can't leave now. We've almost got him!"

"I have an appointment," she says.

"Cancel it!"

She chuckles. "No," she says shortly. "Sorry, boys. If we can't get him down, it'll have to wait until next week."

"Can you do an extra session tomorrow?" Alhaitham asks her. "We're so close."

"Sundays are busy for me," she replies.

"What are you always so busy with?" Tighnari asks her, suddenly suspicious. "You have appointments all the time."

"That's none of your business, little fox," she says smoothly.

Tighnari's eyes narrow. He's about to push back, but Alhaitham calls for them to start the fight again. Unfortunately, they don't manage to get him down before Scara has to go.

"Good night, Scara," says Sethos before she leaves.

"Night, honey. Call you later?"

"Sure."

"Great," says Cyno as Scara leaves the call. "So now everyone in this server is getting action except for me."

"Wait, what?" Kaveh says with a dramatic gasp. "Nari, you haven't given it up yet?"

"What do you mean 'yet'?" Tighnari snaps viciously.

"Ooooh," Kaveh says, long and drawn-out. "You little tease."

"He is," Cyno agrees with a groan. "Nariii, come on. You can't keep doing this to me."

"I can, and I will," he replies stubbornly.

Cyno tsks. "So cruel."

"Scara and I aren't having sex," Sethos says suddenly.

The call is quiet for a moment before Cyno drawls, "Well, what *are* you doing, cousin?"

"I, um." He laughs nervously. "She just talks to me."

"About?" Cyno presses.

"You know, like-" He clears his throat. "I'm sure you guys have all

done it!"

"Done *what?"* Kaveh teases.

"Just- Never mind! Goodnight!" He quickly leaves the call.

Cyno snorts. "Fuckin' nerd."

"He hasn't told you what they're doing?" Kaveh asks.

"No, I can't get a straight answer out of him," Cyno replies.

"It's definitely naughty, though, right?" says Kaveh. "They're not *just* talking."

"No way," Cyno agrees. "They're definitely getting up to something."

Kaveh makes a suggestive noise. "I still want to know what she looks like. And you too, Cyno!"

"What? You've seen me."

"No!" Kaveh insists. "You've never posted anything in the server. Except that picture of the aranara keychain that had your hand in it."

"Oh, hang on," says Cyno. "I got a lot of good material to pick from."

"Kaveh, what have you done?" Tighnari asks him.

"Wait, you haven't even shown Tighnari?" Alhaitham asks. "Dude that's, like, step number one. Why are you so bad at this?"

"Uh… that's actually a really good question," Cyno admits. "To which I do not have an answer."

Tighnari's pulse picks up. He is kind of curious, admittedly. He's never asked for a picture because it's easier to keep his distance that way, but he does want to see. It's probably a terrible idea, but hell.

"I just assumed your outer beauty matches your inner beauty," he says over the call.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Cyno asks him.

"That you look like the disgusting troll you are."

"Oh-ho," Cyno laughs. "You're about to eat those words, Nari."

The image comes through, and Tighnari bites his lower lip as he waits for it to load. When it finally does, he lets out a choked noise. The photo is of a man with long, white hair and a lean build. He's shirtless, wearing only a pair of swim trunks and grinning from ear-to-ear as he raises a hand at the camera. He's on a beach with the sunrise behind him, making his bronze skin glow.

That's Cyno? Cyno, with the terrible jokes and off-key singing and war movie quotes? Oh, God. Oh, fuck. Tighnari is so screwed, because that man is *gorgeous.*

"You okay, Nari?" Cyno asks him in a teasing lilt, his voice rumbling in the way that always makes Tighnari a little hot, and-

He immediately leaves the call without a word, pulling off his headset with one hand while the other dives into his pants. He just- he *can't.* Knowing that voice is attached to that body is too much for him to handle. He gasps as his hand closes around his length.

"Fuck," he whimpers, "Cyno."

Tighnari burns with shame as he strokes his cock from base to tip, quickly bringing himself to full hardness. He moans as he imagines Cyno's voice in his ear telling him he can take it, that he's a good boy. *Fuckfuckfuck* what is he doing right now, he can't be doing this- but it feels so *good.* His eyes rove over the planes of Cyno's abs, the way his tattoos curve around his bicep. They're all stupid anime tattoos, and that's just way too fucking cute, fuck, how is Tighnari going to explain this? Everyone is going to know exactly what he's doing.

"Cyno, yes, Cyno, *ah-"* he cries out as he pumps himself furiously. This is wrong, this is so wrong, and the worst part is he doesn't even fucking care.

Tighnari's teeth clamp down on his lower lip as he approaches the edge. He squeezes his eyes shut, his hips arching off the chair as he pushes into his hand. "Yes, Cyno, give it to me, baby," he moans. He's absolutely dizzy with pleasure. He thinks about Cyno holding him down and fucking him hard, and all at once, Tighnari screams and stripes himself with come, not giving a single fuck about the mess it makes.

He pants heavily as he comes down from that incredible high. Guilt and horror settle in immediately, and Tighnari whines in his throat. "Fuck. Oh, goddammit," he says to himself. "No, no, why-" He suddenly sits up, glaring at the picture of Cyno. "Why did you have to

be hot?" he demands. Cyno remains frozen in the picture, stubbornly refusing to answer his question.

With another whine Tighnari gets up, leaving both Genshin and Discord open as he pulls off his ruined shirt and makes his way to the bathroom. He grumbles to himself as he showers. "Stupid sexy motherfucker," he says, and, "Body of a god," as well as a few other complaints. When he gets back to his computer, he closes everything and shuts it down without looking at any of the messages Cyno has sent him. That's tomorrow's problem.

Tighnari shuffles over to bed, still griping about chiseled legs and lickable abs until he finally manages to fall into a fitful sleep.

***

Tighnari has been ignoring every single one of Cyno's messages for an entire week, and it's driving him absolutely crazy. Finally Saturday rolls around, and Cyno knows Tighnari wouldn't miss raid night. He hops into the server a whole hour before the raid even starts, anxiously waiting for Tighnari to join the call.

He just made that fucking *noise* and then left. What did he do in those twenty minutes before he logged out? Cyno can't stop thinking about it. Collei has been teasing him relentlessly all week, and it's not helping. He's going fucking insane over here. He wants to believe Tighnari liked the photo—how could he not?—but the anxious side of his brain is telling him that Nari is mad at him and is never going to speak to him again, and Cyno just wouldn't be able to handle that at all.

Someone joins the call, and Kaveh's voice immediately says, "You're looking real fucking desperate over here, just so you know."

"Dude, I *am* desperate," he complains. "He hasn't replied to any of my messages!"

"He's probably just embarrassed."

Cyno's heart does a little flip. "You think?"

"Yeah," says Kaveh. "He obviously thinks you're hot. Which you are, by the way."

"Thanks," he mutters distractedly. "You don't think he's mad at me?"

"Why would he be mad at you?"

"I don't know!" Cyno whines. "Fuck, man, I can't take it."

Kaveh snorts into his mic. "You are so down bad for this guy, it's disgusting."

Cyno wants to deny it, but what's the point when it's so fucking obvious?

The thing is, Cyno's never like this. He's never had to chase anyone down before. Dating and sex have always come pretty easily to him. Even the people he's hooked up with over Genshin didn't leave him hanging this long. There were at least some dirty calls and messages in there. He even went to meet a couple of them in person. In fact, Genshin is how he gets most of his dates these days.

It's hard living in a small town. Everyone knows everyone, and Cyno has a little bit of a reputation. He's not a player or anything, and he's always honest about what he's looking for, but by this point people know he gets around. He feels like it's going to be impossible to find his person in Edgefield, so he's started looking elsewhere. And yeah, maybe he doesn't go into every interaction with the idea that it's going to lead him to his soulmate, but he's doing his best, here. He's trying.

He's just getting absolutely fucking nowhere with Tighnari. He honestly should probably give up, but he can't. He *can't.* He wants it too much, and it's making him into a pathetic simp, and honestly, he doesn't even care. Sometimes Cyno thinks any amount of suffering would be worth it as long as he got Tighnari in the end.

Kaveh sympathizes with him, and then Sethos joins the call. Cyno already explained the whole thing to him, and he commiserates too. Soon enough everyone is in server. Everyone except Tighnari.

He joins the call at exactly 7pm and says, "Just so you all know, I'm not talking to Cyno right now."

"Nari," he says desperately. "Nari, come on."

"Should we get started?" Tighnari asks coolly.

No matter how much Cyno begs and pleads, Tighnari won't say a word to him. This boss is the last one they need, but Cyno keeps fucking it up. He can't concentrate.

Finally, Tighnari sighs and says, "Cyno, leave the chat."

Cyno hops out immediately, tapping his foot as he stares at Tighnari's name in Discord. The second the call pops up, he answers. "Hey," he says, "I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" Tighnari asks him, sounding perturbed.

"Whatever I did to make you mad! Was it the picture?"

"I'm not mad at you," he says.

Cyno huffs in disbelief. "Then why won't you talk to me?"

"'Cause I don't want to talk to you."

"I'll stop," he says. "I'll stop everything. The jokes and the innuendos, and I won't sing, and I won't quote anything-"

Tighnari sighs heavily and says, "Cyno-"

"Come on, Nari, please," he begs shamelessly.

"Cyno," he snaps. "Just stop."

"Okay! Okay, I'll stop right now." He breathes shallowly, trying to swallow his panic. Tighnari is quiet for a long moment. "So…" he says hesitantly. "Are you gonna start talking to me again?"

"Fine."

Cyno breathes a sigh of relief. "Okay. Good."

"I didn't mean to upset you," Tighnari says quietly.

"No, no, I'm not upset," Cyno insists.

"You've been losing your mind all night and playing like shit."

"Well, yeah," he admits, "but-"

"What do you want, Cyno?" Tighnari asks shortly. "Tell me about this little game you're playing."

"I'm not playing games. I swear."

"Then why do care so much if I talk to you or not? We've only known each other, like, a couple of months."

Cyno scrambles for words. "I- You're my friend." Tighnari lets out a huff. "I just like talking to you, okay? And even if that's all you ever give me, I don't care. I won't push you."

"You've been pushing me since the day we met," Tighnari points out.

"Well, I won't anymore. Okay? I promise."

He doesn't respond for a minute. Cyno bites his tongue and gives him time. Eventually Tighnari says quietly, "I actually kind of like it."

Cyno blinks. "What?"

"I like it when you push me," he clarifies. "I like the attention. I don't want you to stop."

Cyno tries for a moment to take that in. He feels like something rise in his chest, something that feels like hope. The corner of his mouth lifts in a half-smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Then I won't."

They sit there silently for another handful of seconds, one stretching into the next. Cyno doesn't know what else to say. It sounds like… he didn't actually fuck this up? Like maybe Tighnari is a little bit into him? He's got to be, right?

"Anyway," Tighnari says, clearing his throat. "We should get back to the raid."

"Yeah," Cyno agrees.

"And stop playing the game with your fucking feet."

Cyno laughs and says, "Deal."

They never do talk about what happened after Cyno sent the photo. Tighnari just leaves him to wonder. Cyno doesn't even mind. He'll take whatever he can get from Tighnari and be grateful he has that much, because it's a hell of a lot better than having nothing at all.

Later that night, when Cyno finally crawls into bed, he lays on his side and stares at the wall for several long moments before saying out loud to himself, "Fuck, dude. I am so cooked."

Chapter End Notes

Nari you dirty little slut! How could you? And look at Alhaitham having big feelings, good job Alhaitham. You kind of fucked up but you got there in the end. What a dumbass.

Honestly this is the point where my characterizations got really out of hand and I was like fuck it we're doing it anyway. They're all messy af.

Chapter 7: Are You Actually Good at PVP, Or Are You Shit Like Kaveh?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Scara," Sethos pants. "I'm gonna-"

"Come for me, Sethos."

He cries out as he spurts into his hand. He shivers through the aftershocks, basking in the pleasant glow that warms his entire body. Scara always make him feel so good.

The more they do this, the less embarrassed Sethos is about making noise. Scara seems to like it when he does. Sethos loves hearing her voice say filthy things in his ear. He gets off just thinking about the stuff they do over these calls. Every time he thinks about her he has to take a second to calm himself down so he doesn't get a random boner in the middle of the day. It's kind of embarrassing.

Scara hums over the call. "That feel good, baby?"

"Yeah," he pants. "Was it, um- Was it good for you?"

She's quiet for a moment before she says, "I could use a little more."

Another ping of arousal shoots through Sethos, and his sensitive dick twitches. "Oh, um. Okay." He gulps. "What should I-?"

"Just tell me what you'd do to me if I was there."

"Right. I, um." He clears his throat. He can do this. Right? He'll just say the kind of stuff she usually says. "Well, I'd kiss you."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'd just, like… Take you by the waist and pull you in close. I'd look into your eyes and tuck your hair behind your ear and lean in."

"Mmm. Then what?"

"Um, well. Are we alone in this scenario?"

She chuckles. "Do you want to be alone with me, Sethos?"

He gulps again and says, "Yeah."

"Then we're alone. I'm with you in your bedroom, and you can do whatever you want to me."

He takes in a shaky breath. "Whatever I want?"

"Whatever you want, baby," she repeats. "I'm all yours."

"Mine?" Sethos repeats, heart hammering in his chest. "Are you sure?"

"Mhmm."

A sense of calmness washes over Sethos, soothing his nerves. He can do this. He wants to make Scara feel good, too. She deserves to feel good. She's always so nice to him, so sweet and perfect. He can make it good for her.

"I move my hands to your hips, pulling them against mine so you can feel how much I want you. I kiss you hard, slipping my tongue into your mouth. I back you up onto the bed slowly until the backs of your knees hit the mattress. You crumple, and I follow you down. I kiss you like I don't even need air. You have to breathe through your nose 'cause I refuse to stop. How could I? All I want is to hold you and make love to you all night."

Scara whimpers over the call. "Oh, Sethos. You're so sweet. I love the way you make you feel."

"I love the way your body feels," he goes on, keeping his momentum. "Your chest pressed against mine as I grind down, feeling how… *wet* you are for me." He stutters a little on the word, biting his lower lip. His hand wraps around his cock again. He's still soft, but he strokes himself anyway. He might even be able to get it up again.

"I'm so wet," Scara pants. "I want you to fuck me, Sethos. I want you to fuck me hard. Pull my hair and pound my pussy."

Sethos grunts. Her filthy words are already making him hard again. "I got you, baby. I'll make you feel good."

"Please," she whines.

"I lift your dress and pull your panties down. I put my hand against your- your- *pussy,"* he manages to get out, "so I can feel how wet you

are. I rub you and then bring my fingers to my mouth so I can taste you."

"Sethos," Scara cries. "You're so hot."

"You're hotter," says Sethos. "I can't stop thinking about you. You drive me crazy. I have to have you. I unbutton my pants and pull myself out. I grab your hips and push inside you." Scara moans his name again, and Sethos squeezes his cock. He starts to pull hard and fast, grunting as he thinks about Scara touching herself to the sound of his voice. "I reach down to squeeze your breasts as I- thrust. I look deep into your eyes because I can't look away from you, not now. Not ever. I'm captivated by the way you look under me, spread out on the mattress as I… as I fuck you."

"Fuck me harder," Scara whimpers into her mic. "I can take it. Give me everything."

Her encouragement gives him a spike of confidence. "My cock stretches you open. You're tight, and it feels so good. My fingers dig into your hips as I go faster, harder. I love the way you moan for me. I'm so hot for you, baby."

"Sethos! Sethos, *fuck-"*

"Are you close?" he asks her.

"Yeah," she moans. "Almost there."

"I pound your pussy so hard it makes you see stars. I could fuck you for hours, days. I love the way you feel, so wet and tight and hot." He's close himself. He can't believe he's about to come *again.* He wants Scara to go first, but he's running out of ideas. He thinks of the things she's said to him. That's probably what she wants to hear, right? "I thrust in and out of you, my eyes locked with yours. I fuck you so good the only word you remember is my name. I chant yours over and over again. Scara, Scara, Scara-"

"Sethos! *Ah!"*

The sound of Scara coming is single fucking hottest sound Sethos has ever heard in his life. She moans loudly through her orgasm, and Sethos follows her quickly. It kind of hurts to come again so quickly, but it feels so good at the same time. Sethos groans and pumps himself dry, listening to the way she pants over the call.

"Scara," he pants. "You're so hot, fuck."

She giggles breathlessly. "That's a big swear, Sethos." She huffs. "Damn, honey. I knew you had it in you."

He laughs, too. They both take a moment to catch their breath. A thought occurs to Sethos. "Hey, Scara?" he asks her.

"Yeah, baby?"

"Is that… the first time I got you off?"

She takes a second to answer. "Yeah."

He instantly feels guilty. This whole time he's only thought about himself. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," she says sweetly. "I knew it would take a little time for you to get comfortable."

"I was being selfish, though."

"No, you weren't," she assures him. "I like talking you through it. Just 'cause I don't get off every time doesn't mean I don't like it."

"I want you to feel good, too."

"I always feel good with you."

"I want to make you come," Sethos insists. "Every time."

She lets out a long hum. "Well, how can I argue with that?"

It's quiet for a moment, and Sethos feels a little awkwardness settle in. "Was I, um- Was that okay?"

"You did great, honey," she assures him. "Can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Read some romance novels," she says. "It'll help you a get a better idea of how to word it."

"Oh, okay. Any recommendations?"

"Start with Sarah J. Maas," she suggests. "She writes a lot of fantasy stuff, so it should be right up your alley. The smut is top tier."

"Isn't that kind of like… porn?" he says uncertainly.

"Porn and smut are two totally different things," says Scara. "I don't even get off to smut usually. It's just fun to read. It'll help you, trust me."

"I do trust you," Sethos tells her.

She chuckles. "Thanks, Sethos," she says in a teasing tone.

"Can I get her stuff on Kindle?" he asks.

"Yeah, of course. Once you start reading her, you'll get more recommendations. There are a lot of indie authors who just sell their ebooks for a couple bucks on Amazon. You can get tons of great stuff for cheap."

"Okay. I'm kind of excited," he admits.

"Oo-ooh," Scara coos. "Me too. You want to hop on Genshin for a bit?"

"I should probably get to sleep," Sethos says, looking at the clock. "I've got an early appointment tomorrow."

"Okay. Have a good night, honey. Sleep well."

"You too. Sweet dreams."

"Aww. Aren't you just the cutest thing?"

Sethos grins. He sighs contentedly as the call ends. He's kind of proud of himself for saying all that naughty stuff. He actually managed to get through it! Yeah, it wasn't as smooth as it could've been, but he did it. He can totally do this. Maybe he can even kiss a girl someday. Maybe he can kiss Scara.

They don't actually live that far away. Sethos is in southern Utah, and Scara is only one state over down in Arizona. He could make the drive down there on a weekend. Maybe take a Friday or Monday off work so they can spend a little more time together. Would Scara want to meet him, though? He's afraid to even suggest it in case she says no or thinks he's a weirdo. He's not sure what the rules are with having online dates versus actual dates.

He really wants to take Scara on a date. He doesn't even care what she looks like because it's her kindness and patience he's fallen for. Sethos has never put much stock into looks. He's never been very attractive

himself, and for the most part, he doesn't actually mind. Sure, it would be nice to be some super-hot Chad who gets all the ladies, but Sethos doesn't need that. All he really wants is a girl who likes him for him.

According to Cyno, Sethos had a big glow-up after dental school. That was when he grew his hair out and starting going to the gym. He also finally found the right skin products to clear up his acne, and that helped a lot. The depression thing made it hard to care about his appearance, but working out changed his mindset, in a way. Not that it made him shallow, it just made him feel a little better about himself, and that gave him the boost he needed to start making other changes.

Sethos still has a hard time accepting that Scara finds him attractive. A nice, sweet girl thinks he's cute? It's too good to be true. When Sethos looks into the mirror he still sees an awkward nerd. Maybe he's a little better-looking now that he's in decent shape and has clear skin and nice hair, but he's still a nerd. Maybe Scara likes nerds, though. She does seem to like him.

Sethos starts the next morning in a great mood. His dental assistant notices immediately. "You're way too cheery for 8am," she says, blinking at him sleepily.

Sethos just laughs. "Get some coffee, Layla. And maybe try to go to bed on time for once."

"Mmph. I refuse." She heads over to the coffee maker, brewing herself a cup. "It is good to see you happy."

He looks over at her in surprise. "What?"

She turns around. "I mean, you're always in a pretty good mood, but you seemed kind of lonely before. I'm glad you found somebody."

"I-I-" he stutters, his cheeks flushing red.

Layla cackles. "Aw, look at you. She's a lucky girl, whoever she is. You're a great guy, Sethos. Sweet, dedicated, loyal. Like a golden retriever!"

Sethos sputters and says, "I'm not a *dog!"*

Her eyes flash wickedly. "You're a little puppy. With those big eyes and perfect smile." She laughs at the look on his face. "You know, I had a pretty big crush on you when I first started here."

"What?" he says, choked.

"Don't look so shocked. Girls are all over you all the time."

"What are you talking about?"

She cocks her head at him. "You haven't noticed?"

"Noticed *what?"* he demands.

"Ohh." She smirks. "You were a nerd back in school, weren't you?"

"I'm still a nerd!"

She shakes his head, and says, "Mm-mm. You are a hot, single, successful man who knows how a treat a woman right. You're a unicorn in the dating world. I bet if you put up a Tinder profile, you would have so many matches you wouldn't know what to do with them."

Sethos flushes even deeper, lifting his hand to cover his face. "This is such an awkward conversation."

"You are so *cute,"* she says, laughing. She turns back to the coffee maker to get her drink. "You're a real catch. I hope the girl you're dating knows that and treats you right."

His heart pounds in his chest. He manages to get himself under control with a couple of deep breaths. He isn't technically dating Scara, but... Well, how he could possibly explain it? "She, um." He clears his throat. "She's actually really nice."

"Aww," Layla coos. "Good. You deserve a nice girl." She flips back around with her coffee. "Do you have a picture of her?"

"No," he replies. "I don't know what she looks like. We met over a video game."

Layla lets out a dramatic gasp. "Oh, my God. You like her for *her*. That's so sweet!"

"Shut up," he mumbles. He clears his throat pointedly. "We should get to work."

"Aw, okay." Layla gives him a sweet smile. "I hope things work out between you two."

"Me too," says Sethos. "I… really like her."

She makes a face and starts to coo again. Sethos laughs, too happy to do anything else.

Scara makes him happy. Maybe it's silly to imagine their future together, since they don't even live in the same state, and there's still a lot he doesn't know about her. But Sethos does like her a lot. He has hope they can be together someday. He wants it so bad. She's perfect in every way.

He goes about the rest of the day with a goofy little smile on his face.

***

"Sit on my face, baby."

Scara rolls his eyes. The call has already gone four minutes over. This client is a huge cash cow, but it's super annoying when they take forever to come.

"Ooh, you're so good to me," he coos. "You gonna lick my clit? You want me to suffocate you with my pussy?"

"Yeah, baby. F-fuck. Ride me."

Scara moans and keeps talking until the guy lets out that telltale grunt that means this is *finally* over. It would be rude to leave the call immediately, so Scara waits impatiently for a few seconds.

"You like that, Scara?" he asks.

"Mm, yeah," Scara moans.

The guy chuckles. "Damn. Send me another pic."

"What for?"

"So I can look at you later."

"I'll have to charge you extra," Scara reminds him.

"Just send it, bitch," the guy snaps.

Scara huffs. He goes through his phone for the AI-generated images he's saved. Honestly, AI is a lifesaver for demanding clients like this. The girl version of him is pretty hot, if you're into that kind of thing.

He kept his blue hair because it gives off e-girl energy. He gave himself huge anime titties, of course, always bulging out of some slutty top. He does have to do the facial expressions himself, since AI always fucks them up, but it's still very useful. Scara pirated Photoshop a few years back just to do a couple more edits so can make sure the images are perfect. He doesn't want anyone catching on.

He sends the photo, and the guy grunts. "Perfect little slut."

"Thank you," he says. "Always a pleasure chatting with you."

"Fuckin' liar," he grunts. "You got tomorrow night open?"

"I'm busy Saturday nights."

"Yeah? Whoring yourself out to some cuck, huh?"

"Maybe," he says lightly.

The guy scoffs. "Whatever. You got Sunday?"

"Sure. Usual time?"

"Works for me."

"Perfect," Scara purrs.

"Night," he says quickly, leaving the call.

Scara lets out a sigh of relief. "Finally," he mutters. He logs onto Genshin to check his market listings. He quickly updates his prices to undercut the same fucking asshole who's always trying to PVP him on the market board, then checks the server to see if anyone is on. He's hoping for Cyno or Tighnari so he can get a quick queue, but it looks like it's just Alhaitham and Kaveh right now.

He does actually really like the raid group. They're all pretty fucking good, and they have a lot of fun together. He looks forward to raid night every week as a way to unwind and spend time with his friends. He's not super close with any of them, really—except for Sethos—but he does hang out in voice chat occasionally. These guys are cool. It makes Scara feel kind of guilty for lying to them.

Lying to Sethos, in particular, puts a little pit into his stomach every time. Usually Scara thinks it's pretty funny that his clients don't realize they're getting off with a dude, and he gets a kick out of manipulating

them. Sethos is so sweet, though. He feels a little bad about it. Especially since he's been opening up about his mental health lately.

Scara is still trying to get him to go to therapy, but he's being pretty damn stubborn. He insists he's fine and doesn't need it, but Scara can tell he's lying. Sethos is still affected by the trauma he went through, and he needs to work it out so can move forward. There's only so much Scara can do for him, though. He's just some asshole cosplaying as a girl online. His personal experience does give him some idea how to handle a situation like this, but he's the farthest thing you can get from a professional.

He clicks to join the voice chat. The first thing he hears is Kaveh shrieking over the line. "Are you playing PVP?" Scara asks them.

"Yes," Alhaitham replies. "And Kaveh's being a drama queen."

"Stupid fucking- *gah!* I hate this rogue!" Kaveh yells.

"Want me to kill him for you?"

"Yes, baby."

Scara raises an eyebrow. "So you two *are* a couple now, right?"

"Yes," says Kaveh.

"No," says Alhaitham.

Kaveh scoffs loudly. "What? Why are you lying?"

"'Cause it's none of her business," Alhaitham replies.

"Okay, but you can't just *lie* and say you're not my boyfriend when you've literally confessed your undying love for me!"

"Have not," Alhaitham argues.

"Have so," Kaveh shoots back. "Don't listen to him, Scara. He's deeply, madly in love with me."

"I honestly can't tell which one of you is lying their ass off right now," he remarks.

"Him!" they both shout at the same time.

Scara chuckles. "Okay, whatever. Can I join you next match?"

"Depends," says Alhaitham. "Are you actually good at PVP, or are you shit like Kaveh?"

"I'm not shit, you're shit!" Kaveh screeches.

"I'm literally rank eleven NA right now."

"Oh wow, look how fucking cool you are," Kaveh snarks. "I do more DPS than you in hardcore raids, and we all know that's what really counts."

"I beat you both last week," Scara points out.

"That's because he was sending me nudes," says Alhaitham.

"Alhaitham!" Kaveh screams. "Don't listen to him, Scara, he's a fucking liar."

"Nudes during raid night." Scara chuckles. "So naughty. Can I see?"

"Don't flirt with my boyfriend," Alhaitham snaps.

"Aha! So you admit I'm your boyfriend."

"Nope."

"You just said it!"

"No, I didn't. You misheard me."

Someone else joins the call. Scara looks over and sees it's Sethos. He lets out a flirty, "He-ey."

"Sethos!" Kaveh exclaims. "I have a bone to pick with you."

"Okay. Um. What'd I do?" asks Sethos.

"How come you only join VC when Scara is here?" Kaveh says in an accusatory tone.

"Uh…" Sethos laughs nervously.

"Do you not like us?"

"I like you!" he exclaims.

"Aw, don't tease my sweet boy," Scara chides them. "He can't help simping for me."

Sethos laughs and says, "I don't simp for you."

"Yes, you do," Scara banters back.

"You totally do," Kaveh agrees. "It's sickening."

Sethos sputters. "You're the one always making gross gay jokes to your boyfriend."

"Excuse you!" Kaveh says, sounding highly offended. "What's gross about being gay?"

"Uh- I- Nothing," he says quickly.

"Sethos, are you homophobic?" Alhaitham asks him.

"No!" he squeaks. "I mean, I- I used to be."

Kaveh gasps dramatically. "There's a traitor in our midst! Burn him at the stake!"

"I'm not anymore!" he says quickly. "I just, like- Ugh. I grew up really religious, and my parents protested gay marriage, and I kind of went along with it-"

"How dare you," says Kaveh. "I'm kicking you right now."

"No-no-no, I'm sorry!" Sethos says desperately. "Please don't kick me!"

"Kaveh," Scara says sternly. "Stop threatening my poor little homophobic dentist."

"I'm not homophobic, I swear!" he insists. "I don't believe any of that crap anymore. Not since college. I went to BYU, and we had to take these religion classes, and some of the stuff they said about Joseph Smith just didn't add up-"

"Wait," Kaveh says with a gasp, "you were a *Mormon?"*

"Yeah, but I was just a kid! I didn't have a choice! It's how I grew up. I left when I stopped believing in it. Although… I- I did still finish out my undergrad at BYU. And I had to keep going to church 'cause I didn't want them to kick me out of school."

"Oh, you poor thing," Scara coos. "Kaveh, you're freaking him out."

"I don't care if you're gay!" Sethos goes on. "I mean, good for you. I'm

glad you guys are happy together. You should be able to love whoever you want and get married and adopt kids and all of that."

Kaveh laughs over the call. "I'm just teasing you, Sethos. I'm not going to kick you. I honestly don't think you have you have a mean bone in your body."

Sethos lets out a relieved sigh. "Oh, ha. Good. 'Cause I really don't believe in that stuff. I mean, I do still have to go to church so my parents don't figure it out-"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," says Alhaitham. "You still go to their church?"

"Yeah," Sethos admits. "Every Sunday. It's a singles ward."

"Singles ward?" Scara repeats.

"Yeah. Everyone there is single and under thirty-five. It's supposed to help you find somebody to marry in the temple."

"Dude, *what?"* Kaveh says, scandalized. He laughs uproariously. "So what, they just like, put you all together and go, 'multiply and replenish the earth'?"

"Yeah, they use that phrase a lot," says Sethos.

"Oh, my God," Scara laughs. "Honey, you've got to get out of there."

"It's not that easy," Sethos complains. "People there know my parents. They'd find out I left!"

"So?" says Alhaitham. "You're an adult. Why do you care what your parents think?"

Sethos sighs. "They're the ones who bought my practice, and they paid the downpayment on my house."

"So?" Kaveh remarks. "It's all in your name, right?"

"Yeah."

"So fuck them!" he says heatedly. "What are they going to do about it? You're allowed to make your own decisions about what you believe."

"Yeah, but they'd be so mad," he says despondently. "And disappointed in me. I don't want to deal with that."

"Sethos, honey," Scara says gently. "How long are you going to keep this up? Will you just let them dictate your life forever?"

"I- No! It's just…" He lets out a little whine. "They've always loved and supported me, you know."

"If they really love you, then they'll accept you no matter what," Scara tells him. "And if they don't, then their love is conditional, and you deserve better than that."

"You don't understand," Sethos insists. "I can't just *leave*. I live in Utah! There are Mormons everywhere. I would be shunned!"

Scara shrugs. "Leave Utah, then. Arizona's pretty nice. I mean, it's hot and miserable as fuck in the summer, and kind of in the spring and fall too. But that'll put enough distance between you and your parents that you can feel free to live your life on your own terms. You can't let them control you forever."

Sethos is quiet for a moment before he says, "You… want me to move to Arizona? With you?"

Too late, Scara realizes how that must've come across. He swallows a groan at his own stupidity. "That's not what I meant."

"Oh," says Sethos softly.

The call is silent and incredibly awkward. Fuck, Scara has to fix this. *Say something, jackass!* he yells at himself.

"I mean…" He purses his lips. "It doesn't have to be Arizona. You could move to Nevada or Colorado just as easily."

"Yeah," says Sethos. Goddammit, he sounds so dejected. Scara really fucked up, there.

"I, um-" Scara clears his throat. "Sorry, I have to go," he says quickly, leaving the call.

Coward! screams the voice in his head. Scara's pulse is racing. He doesn't want Sethos to move to Arizona. Does he? No. It's way too soon for that. Besides, they're not even together. They just get each other off sometimes. Scara does that with plenty of other people.

But… it feels different with Sethos. He's so sweet and precious. He's a good guy. Not like the other guys Scara talks to. He always treats

Scara well.

Of course, there is the matter of Sethos thinking he's a woman. Which he very much is not. So there's no way they could ever meet in person. Sethos would flip his shit if he found out Scara's been lying to him this whole time and is actually a dude. No, that can never happen.

Scara bites his lower lip. What if he decided he still likes Scara anyway? They could… Oh, for fuck's sake, they could *what?* Go on a date? Get some coffee in a cute little shop downtown? No. Scara is a sex worker. Sethos would never want to date him, even if he *was* a girl. He would be horrified if he knew. Scara doesn't get to have cute dates with nice guys. He gets dirty phone sex with assholes who treat him like shit.

His head droops onto his desk. He logs out of Genshin and lies down on the couch, turning on a random anime to distract himself. It doesn't work, though. All he can think about is Sethos and that adorable little smile as he bites his boba straw. He's so cute. He's so nice. He's literally the perfect man.

Scara doesn't deserve him.

Chapter End Notes

> Ssh Sethos can get it up as many times as necessary, don't question it.
>
> What's going to happen when Scara and Sethos do meet, hmm? Kind of funny that we're this deep and we still have not heard a word about the anime con. This is going to be way longer than I intended. Oh well. We will get there eventually, I'm sure. And then God knows how long it will take to get through the entire con... What have I signed myself up for? Oh, well. At least I get to drag all of you into this mess with me.
>
> Appreciate all your support so far, love you! I'll have the next chapter out once I get off my ass and write something.

Chapter 8: You Know What's Not Good For Your Heart? Getting Pushed Off A Fucking Cliff

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Another month goes by, and the second raid tier releases. Crewmeru is one of the first guilds to clear it on hardcore. They start getting applications, and Alhaitham and Kaveh have a little debate over expanding the guild. Kaveh likes what they have while Alhaitham thinks they could gain recognition as an established guild. In the end Kaveh convinces him that they should keep it small, with just the six of them. They've all become pretty good friends, laughing and joking together as they clear endgame content. Each of them pops in at some point throughout the week just to fuck around and have a good time. Even Scara is joining more often, and of course, whenever she's there, Sethos is there.

Kaveh is *deathly* curious about what is going on with those two. He's always been a little bit of a gossip queen, and he loves inserting himself into drama. They both refuse to squeal, though. Cyno, on the other end, talks endlessly about how desperate he is to bag Tighnari. The fox is still being stubborn. Kaveh doesn't get why. Cyno's pretty fucking hot. Once upon a time, Kaveh might've made a pass at him. He's really happy with Alhaitham now, though.

Sure, there have been a few misunderstandings, but they've been navigating it together. There are some challenges that come with having a boyfriend who lives clear on the other side of the country, but Kaveh is willing to put in the work to overcome those challenges for Alhaitham. In fact, there's not a lot he wouldn't do for Alhaitham. He's in love, and it feels pretty fucking great.

Kaveh thinks sometimes how lucky he is to be here after all he's gone through. It was rough for awhile there, but look at him now! He has great friends and a boyfriend who loves him. It feels really good, and he's grateful for it every day.

"Hey, Kaveh?" Alhaitham says softly in his ear.

"Hmm?" Kaveh replies. He's settled in bed with his phone beside him,

headset on as he and Alhaitham talk about everything and nothing. "What is it?"

"You know I love you, right?"

Kaveh frowns. "Yeah." When Alhaitham doesn't say anything else, Kaveh sits up. "Alhaitham, what's wrong?"

"I know I don't say it enough," he goes on. "But I'm serious about you, Kaveh. I keep thinking about how all of this is going to work with us being so far apart."

He purses his lips together tightly. This is an important conversation. He leans forward, crossing his legs and placing his hands on his knees. "Yeah?" he prompts.

"Yeah. I want to take the next step with you."

"Okay. The next step being…?" Kaveh's heart pounds as he waits for clarification.

"I want to meet up," says Alhaitham. "In person."

A wide smile blooms on Kaveh's face. "You do?" he whispers.

"Yeah, I do. Like… if the chemistry is this good from three thousand miles away, what do you think it'll be like in person?"

"Oh, it'll be real fucking good," he groans.

"That's what I'm thinking."

Kaveh bites his lip. Alhaitham is in great shape. He'd give it to Kaveh so good. "Where should we meet? Do you want to come out here? Should I go over there?"

"We could meet in the middle," Alhaitham suggests.

"Yeah, okay," Kaveh agrees. "Where would that be? Like… Oklahoma?"

Alhaitham tsks. "I'm not taking you to fucking Oklahoma."

Kaveh giggles and says, "Okay, then where?"

"What about Colorado? We could get a cabin in the mountains or something."

"Colorado's a lot closer to me than it is to you," Kaveh points out.

"I don't care," says Alhaitham. "I'll go as far as I need to."

"Aww." Kaveh's smile widens. "We should go to Aspen."

"I've been. It's pretty nice."

Kaveh snorts. "Okay, that was a joke. There's no way I could afford that."

"What the hell makes you think you're paying for it?"

Surprised, Kaveh lets out a little laugh. "Okay, Mr. Moneybags. You really want to go to Aspen?"

"It's beautiful this time of year. You ever been skiing?"

"No," says Kaveh. "I've never even seen snow."

"What, really?" Alhaitham huffs. "Okay, that's it, we have to go now."

"Okay." Kaveh reaches up to cover his mouth. "Okay, let's go."

"When can you get time off work?"

"Um." He tries to think. He's so fucking elated, it's hard to concentrate. "It'll be tricky around the holidays."

"What about, like… mid-January?"

"I can probably swing that. I'll have to check how much PTO I have."

"We've got to go for at least a week."

Kaveh squeals behind his hand. "A whole week? Alone with you at a ski resort in Aspen?"

"Yeah," Alhaitham says with a hint of heat in his tone. "It'll be our little romantic getaway."

He squeals again, then finally lifts his hand from his mouth. "Okay!" he blurts out. "Sounds perfect."

"I'm gonna put all the moves on you."

"Ooh, he has *moves,"* Kaveh giggles.

"Yeah, I got moves."

"Mmm. Sounds promising." He lays back down. "Tell me about them."

"No," Alhaitham replies. "It's a surprise."

Kaveh gasps. "Okay, okay. Tell me something else, then."

"What do you want to hear?"

"What are you gonna do to me when I get there?" Kaveh asks him in a sultry tone.

"Pick you up and carry you straight to bed," he says.

Kaveh giggles again. "That right? You gonna throw me on the mattress and have your filthy way with me?"

"You bet."

The smile on his face just won't quit. It'll be amazing to actually see Alhaitham in person, to touch him and kiss him and do every filthy thing that enters their minds. God, he doesn't even care if they make it up the mountain. He'd be content to stay in bed all day drinking him in.

"Can't wait," he whispers.

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"No-no-no-no-no- FUCK, STOP DYING!" Tighnari screams.

"I want to liiiive!" Cyno screams back.

"Then use your fucking shield, you imbecile!"

"It's on cooldown! Moonbeam me!"

"I don't have it!"

"Fuck, no! Not like this, bro. AHHHH-"

"What are you *doing?"*

"Tactical retreat!"

"Stand still, you dumb motherfucker!"

"'At the edge of our hope, at the end of our time, we have chosen not only to believe in ourselves but in each other!'" Cyno quotes.

"I don't believe in any of these bitches!" Tighnari shouts back, slamming every fucking key just trying to keep Cyno alive.

"'Today we face the monsters that are at our door and BRING THE FIGHT TO THEM!'"

"Where the hell are you going?" Tighnari screeches, chasing after him.

"I'm kiting them! If they can't touch me, I can't die!"

He can't help cracking up at the way Cyno frantically runs in a circle with 10 HP. Tighnari can't even heal him like this. "What are you, a fucking sorcerer wearing a cloth robe, *get back here!"* he complains between peals of laughter. "Who are you even bringing the fight to, the wall?"

"That's a great idea," says Cyno, changing direction. "If I run into the next room, surely they'll get tired of chasing me and give up."

"No the fuck *they will not,* Cyno, stop it!" Tighnari's laughing so hard, tears are leaking from his eyes. "The next room is the trap room!"

"Perfect! I'll run them into the traps."

"No, Cyno!" Tighnari follows him, sprinting to catch up. "You're gonna die before you get there!"

"Not if I run fast." He starts panting heavily into the mic like he's actually running. "Can't catch me, bitches!"

"Cyno, stop, come back, I can heal you now!"

"It's too late for that," says Cyno, running straight for the piston trap. "Tell my wife I love her."

"You don't have a wife!"

"You're my wife, and I love you more than life itself!"

"Cyno, don't!"

They both scream as Cyno runs straight into a piston trap that pushes him off the edge of the map. By some miracle, he manages to get the half-dead enemies in it, too, so they all get pushed off with him.

"I love yoooouuu!" Cyno shouts as he falls to his death.

Tighnari can't stop laughing. "You… fucking… *why*…" He reaches down and clutches his side. It actually hurts to laugh this hard.

"Did I get 'em all?" Cyno asks.

"Yeah," Tighnari manages to get out.

"Wahoo!" Cyno cheers. "See? I told you it would work."

Wiping tears from his eyes, Tighnari looks over at the text chat and snorts. "Dude, the rogue is flaming you so hard right now."

"Why, bro? It totally worked."

"I can't res you," says Tighnari. "You're out of range. You're gonna have to run back."

"Eh, it's fine. Cardio's good for your heart."

"Oh yeah? You know what's not good for your heart? Getting pushed off a fucking *cliff!"* Tighnari is gasping in air by this point. "That was the dumbest fucking thing I've ever seen."

"Yeah," says Cyno, and Tighnari can hear the smile in his voice, "but you're laughing, though."

"You stupid bitch." Just as Tighnari finally manages to stop, a notification pops up on his screen, and he starts howling again. "Dude, the rogue started a vote-kick!"

"Aw, what?" Cyno complains. "That's not cool. You're not gonna kick me, right, Nari?"

"I should," says Tighnari, voting not to kick him. "You deserve it."

"No! I'm sorry, baby."

"Don't apologize to me, apologize to the rogue," Tighnari replies.

"Nah," Cyno replies. "I'm not actually sorry." He finally arrives at the start of the boss chamber, where they're all waiting for him. "Leggo, bitches."

"Promise me you will never, *ever* do that again," Tighnari says as Cyno pulls the boss.

Cyno chuckles mischievously. "I don't know, Nari. You're pretty cute when you laugh."

"Cyno, please," he begs. "Please, for the love of God-"

"Oh, alright," Cyno folds easily. "I promise next time I will die like a war hero and not a coward."

"Thank you," Tighnari breathes.

"You're welcome." There's a brief pause before he says, "Just so you know, your little snort is the most adorable thing I've ever heard."

"Shut up."

"I'm serious. I recorded it."

"You did not."

"Grabbed it in the replay," Cyno says unrepentantly.

"Cyno," Tighnari warns him.

"I'm gonna post it in the server."

"Don't you dare." Cyno says nothing, and Tighnari's eyes widen. "Cyno, I will show up on your doorstep and bitch slap you right in the face."

"Ooh, you're gonna come see me?" Cyno says, and Tighnari swears.

"That's not what I meant-"

"You should do it. I'll take a slap any day if it means I get to see you."

"Dumbass. Your last brain cell is struggling real hard right now."

He chuckles again. "You should come visit me."

"I'm not getting on a plane to fucking South Carolina."

"Okay, I'll come see you."

"And do what?" Tighnari challenges. "You think once I see you in person I'll just be all over you?"

"Would you?" Cyno asks him.

"Hell no."

"I think you would."

"Nope."

"Come on, Nari," Cyno says in that voice he only uses when he's trying to be sexy. It's very effective. "Stop lying."

"I wouldn't even hug you," Tighnari insists.

Cyno gasps. "What? I don't even get a hug?"

"I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole."

"Oh, you're cruel, baby." And then he lets out a little, "Mm. I like it."

Tighnari clenches his teeth and exhales quietly, trying to keep his cool.

"You getting hot over there?" Cyno asks him.

"No," Tighnari says immediately.

"You cheeky little liar. You know what I do to liars?"

Tighnari breathes in softly and asks, "What?"

"Waterboard 'em."

He lets out a yelp. "Cyno!"

Cyno laughs. They manage to kill the boss and start rolling for loot. "You were hoping I'd say something dirty, huh?"

"No," he lies.

"Strap him to the chair, boys."

"I won't go quietly."

"That's never stopped me before." When he loses the roll on the gloves, Cyno says, "Ah, fuck! Seriously, dude?"

Tighnari cackles. He got 74, and Cyno got a 73. "Kiss my ass."

"Sure thing, baby. Let me just hop on a flight over there."

"Stop," Tighnari complains. They both leave the instance.

"Okay, let me just take the opposite of that real quick."

"I hate you."

"Love you too, Nari." He lets out a deep sigh, then claps his hands. "So, what are we doing next?"

"Ooh, let me show you my glam on my bard," Tighnari says, quickly logging out of his druid. "I look so fucking hot."

"Oh, so you're gonna tease me some more?"

"Don't pretend you don't like it."

Cyno chuckles and says, "I'd like it better if you gave in. How long are you gonna make me wait?"

Tighnari bites his lower lip and doesn't answer for a moment. "Cyno, I-" he starts, then stops, shaking his head.

"What?" Cyno asks softly.

He hesitates, debating with himself for a moment. It's been quite some time now since they met, and Cyno still hasn't given up. That doesn't mean he's serious about this. But it does make Tighnari think that maybe… maybe he wouldn't go cold after he gets what he wants. Maybe he'd keep it up, and nothing would have to change. They're all pretty committed to the static at this point, and Tighnari doesn't think he'd just up and leave if things went sour between them. Their group has gotten close these last few months.

Cyno and Tighnari have gotten close, too. They talk every day. Literally every single day. They say good morning and good night. When Tighnari's bored he can just message Cyno, and he'll reply instantly, no matter where he is or what he's doing. He really makes Tighnari a priority in his life, and that feels good. But that's how it felt with his ex, too, and look how that ended.

Tighnari sighs heavily as he logs in to his bard. "Did I ever tell you about my Genshin ex?"

"Wait, what? There's a Genshin ex?"

"Yeah. Come to the crafting station in Fontaine." Tighnari closes his eyes and takes a breath. "We used to raid together. He wasn't as, uh… fucking *loud* as you are about it as you are, but he made his interest

known."

"When was this?" Cyno asks. He rolls up to the crafting station. "Ooh, you look sexy."

"Thanks." He blows a kiss at Cyno's character. "It was, like… five years ago now, I think? That was when it started, anyway."

"How long did it go on?" Cyno gets down on one knee, offering Tighnari a bouquet. Tighnari smiles.

"About… three years in between when we started dating and when I found him jerking it over voice with a big-titty catgirl."

"Ohhh." Cyno hisses. "Fuck, dude."

"Yeah." Tighnari rolls his eyes. He cycles through emotes, and Cyno starts to copy him. "Turns out he was a huge whale, and he bought thousands of dollars' worth of primogems and spent them all on ERP. Which he'd been doing the whole time we were together. So. That felt great."

"I'm sorry," says Cyno. "That was real shitty of him."

"Yeah, it was," Tighnari agrees. "Especially since he'd proposed to me the day before."

Cyno is quietly stunned for a moment before asking, "What did you say?"

"I said yes," he grits out viciously, "'cause I'm a dumb bitch like that."

"Hey now, you know that's not your fault. How were you supposed to know he was a cheater?"

Tighnari shrugs. "I don't know. I just feel like… there had to have been a red flag somewhere, right? Some sign I missed? And if I missed something that huge, what else am I going to miss? Next time I pack up my shit and move states just be with a guy who says he loves me, how will I know if he means it or if he's just lying to my face like fucking everybody else?"

He stops emoting, and Cyno stops too. He steps closer in the game and says, "Come here," giving Tighnari's character a hug.

Tighnari snorts. "Thanks," he says sarcastically. "Whatever. Live and learn, right?"

"Yeah, that's how it goes." They're both quiet for a few seconds before Cyno says, "I haven't always had the best luck either, you know."

"Oh, really?" he replies skeptically. "Then why are you so overconfident?"

"I'm not, actually," says Cyno. "It's just a way to weed people out."

"Oh?" Despite himself, Tighnari is actually interested. "Do tell."

Cyno hums and says, "Okay. It's like this, right? I got a healthy sense of humor."

"Understatement."

"Yeah, true," he agrees. "It's important to me, though, to find somebody I can laugh with. In fact, I would say it's the *most* important thing."

"Is it?"

"Oh, yeah," says Cyno emphatically. "What do you think keeps people together, huh? After five, ten, twenty years?"

"I wouldn't know," Tighnari says bitterly. "Since my record is three."

"You know what I think it is?"

"Dick jokes?" Tighnari guesses.

Cyno chuckles and says, "No, man. Not *just* dick jokes. All kinds of jokes, like… the laughs you've shared together and the memories you've made. That's what makes you want to stay with somebody. So it's important to me to find someone I can laugh with. Someone who actually thinks I'm funny."

"Which is probably a very small percentage of people."

"Yeah, but you're one of 'em."

Tighnari scoffs. "I don't think you're funny."

"Oh-ho-ho, you dirty little liar."

"I seriously don't find you funny," Tighnari insists.

"No?" says Cyno, a challenge in his voice. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah."

"How sure?"

"Completely."

"Hundred percent?"

"Hundred percent."

There's a ping in the text chat. Tighnari clicks over. It's the screen recording of their run. Tighnari gasps in pure shock and offence. "Oh, you *bastard."*

Cyno chuckles in response.

"See if I ever fuck you now," Tighnari says heatedly. "I was actually considering it, but not anymore."

"No," Cyno says in horror. "No, wait, I'll delete it right now!"

"It's too late. You've broken my trust."

"No, Nari, come on-" he says, frantically clicking. "Look, there, it's gone! Nobody saw it!"

"Mm-mm, nope, you lost your chance."

Cyno lets out a long groan. "Nari, don't do this to me."

"You did it to yourself," he insists.

"Please, please forgive me," Cyno begs.

"Never."

Cyno continues to make wounded noises over the chat, and Tighnari starts to laugh at him. Eventually Cyno starts to laugh, too.

"At least you're laughing," Cyno says. "I'll take that as a win."

Their chuckles taper off and quiet after awhile. Tighnari suddenly feels a surge of emotion he can't name. "Hey, Cyno?" he says.

"Yeah?"

He bites his lip and says, "I'd hug you. If we ever met."

"Would you really?"

"Yeah," says Tighnari. He swallows the lump in his throat. "And then I'd slap you."

Cyno laughs and says, "Okay, fair. I'll take what I can get."

"And you'll like it," he adds.

"Oh, definitely."

Tighnari smiles. They keep playing for awhile. Tighnari doesn't realize how late it's gotten until he looks at the clock and see it's four in the morning. He yelps over the call.

"Tighnari?" Cyno asks immediately. "Are you okay?"

"Dude, it's 4am!"

Cyno snorts. "It's 7am here, man. Sun'll be coming up soon."

Tighnari laughs and says, "We should probably go to sleep."

"I don't want to sleep."

"Aren't you tired?" Tighnari asks him.

"Yeah," he replies.

"Then go to sleep!"

"I can't," says Cyno. "I don't want to say goodnight."

Tighnari bites his lower lip. A little whimper escapes his throat.

"Tighnari? What was that?" Tighnari bites his lip harder, refusing to answer. "You don't want to either, do you?"

He takes in shallow breaths. His brain is mush at this point. He needs to end the call before he says something stupid.

"Why don't we stay on the call until we fall asleep?" Cyno suggests.

Tighnari swallows thickly. "Okay," he says quietly.

"Okay. Uh, we should probably leave the server chat, though. Get ready for bed. I'll call you in a minute."

He hangs up. He goes to brush his teeth and crawls into bed, plugging in his phone. When the call from Cyno comes through, Tighnari puts it on speaker and lays his phone down.

"Hey," says Cyno softly. "You in bed?"

Tighnari gulps and says, "Yeah."

"You comfy?"

"Yeah."

"Good." He hums. "I'm so tired, dude."

"Me too," says Tighnari.

They both breathe together for a moment. Tighnari wonders if he'll… Would Tighnari resist, if he tried something right now? Probably not.

"Cyno," he whispers.

"Yeah?"

Tighnari presses his lips together before saying, "Good night."

Cyno huffs. "Good night, beautiful," he replies.

Tighnari closes his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

> Vote-kick: If someone is being really terrible you can start a vote to kick them out and replace them. Usually you have to have majority for it to pass.
>
> Okay so technically I'm breaking the rules by making Alhaitham and Kaveh meet up before the con, but it's going to be very cute. You have an actual sex scene to look forward to now, so you're welcome.
>
> Cyno, I'm sorry for what I've put you through. The teasing is still not over. I promise Tighnari gives it up eventually, but... damn, he really makes him work for it. I hope you're enjoying the banter because I am. This is definitely one of my favorite chapters. This characterization of Tighnari has been so, so fun. Just you wait

until they meet. Picture me rubbing my hands together evilly.

Chapter 9: Getting Laid Is Not A Substitute For Getting Mental Health Support

Chapter Notes

> You guys get another chapter today because it's my birthday and I want to be flooded with your lovely comments. Really appreciate the support for this fic, you're all so wonderful!

"Cyno," Scara says sternly. "You fucked up, and now you have to be the one to fix it."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Cyno interjects. "You can't just pin this whole thing on me! That's not cool, bro."

"You cannot deny that this is at least partly your fault," Scara insists.

His fingers clench over his mouse as he mindlessly clicks through his rotation. They're pugging one of the raids on hard mode right now just because Cyno is incapable of having a serious conversation unless he's playing Genshin. Scara has figured this out the hard way.

He already read Cyno the riot act about not supporting his cousin's mental health. It seemed like Cyno felt really guilty at first—which he *should,* in Scara's opinion—but now they're just trying to work out a strategy to get Sethos to admit he needs help. Cyno keeps trying to say that he can't *make* Sethos go to therapy, which is true, but Scara refuses to let him off that easily.

"Bitch, back the fuck up," Cyno snaps. "I love my cousin, and I would never hurt him."

"Not intentionally," Scara agrees. "But you were there when he was going through it, and you didn't help. You made it worse."

Cyno huffs. "Fuck. I don't how any of this shit works, okay? I was just trying to help him score. And hey, look, it worked!"

"Okay, first of all," says Scara in his sassiest girl voice, "getting laid is not a substitute for getting mental health support. And second, he's still a virgin, technically speaking. So you didn't do shit."

"Well, how 'bout you hop on a plane and fix that, girlie?"

Scara growls into his mic. "Cyno," he says warningly.

"Alright, alright." Cyno sighs. "What do you expect me to do, Scara? How am I supposed to help? You know way more about this shit than I do."

"Yes, but he respects you."

Cyno makes a noise of protest. "Are you saying my boy doesn't respect you?"

Scara rolls his eyes. "Oh, come on. I'm just some slut he gets off with," he grumbles.

"Hey, now," says Cyno firmly. "I know my cousin, and I know he doesn't think of you that way."

"Well that's how it is, regardless of how he thinks of it," Scara insists.

Cyno is quiet for a moment. "You toying with my boy's heart, Scara?"

He bites his lip guiltily and doesn't answer.

"Nah, I don't think you are," Cyno goes on. "I think you like him. I think the problem is you don't respect yourself, and you're projecting that onto him."

Scara huffs irritably. "I didn't ask for your psychoanalysis, asshole," he snaps.

"Maybe you ought to take your own advice and get some fucking therapy for that," Cyno says smugly.

"I went every week for four years, you jackass. That doesn't change the reality of the situation. The fact is that I *am* a slut, and Sethos-" He quickly bites his tongue.

"Is a good guy?" Cyno finishes for him. "And you're not used to that?"

Scara sighs. The raid wipes again, and Scara brings his hand up to bat the hair back from his face. "He's a *great* guy," he mumbles.

"He is," Cyno agrees.

Scara resurrects and sullenly waits for Cyno to pull the boss again. Some of the randoms are arguing in chat. Scara doesn't think this group is going to clear, honestly. He could probably give them some

pointers, but he doesn't really feel up to it.

It's not fair, he thinks to himself. Sometimes he wishes they'd never met. It's torture to have something he can't have dangled in front of his face like this.

"I'm no expert, but it sounds to me like you still got some personal shit to work out," Cyno says eventually.

Scara is suddenly angry at the whole situation. His nostrils flare as he says, "You want to know what I do for work, Cyno? You want to know what all those appointments are for? Take a guess. Come on. I realize you're not that smart, but surely you can figure it out."

"I had a feeling," Cyno says quietly.

He lets out a little whimper, which he smothers with his hand. It's quiet over the call for several minutes as they both play through the raid. Scara's eyes start to water, and he furiously blinks the tears away. He is *not* going to cry about this. There's nothing to cry about. He made his own bed.

"You think he won't want you anymore when he finds out?" Cyno asks him.

Scara laughs humorlessly. "Why would he? I'm used goods."

"No, you're not," Cyno says. Scara doesn't even see the point in arguing. "You just do voice chat, right?"

"Yeah."

"So it's not like you're fucking 'em."

Scara huffs. "It's close enough."

"Nah, it's not the same," Cyno argues. "Do you have an OF?"

"No," Scara answers. "I don't like letting them see me. I send photos sometimes, but they're AI. And it's all softcore."

"Ooh, smart. So… there's no actual material of you on the internet? It's just Discord calls?"

"And the photos."

"Yeah, but they're not even real," Cyno points out. "That ain't that bad,

Scara."

"It's bad enough," Scara snaps.

"Nah, come on," he insists. "You can get out easy. It's not like there's any evidence. You can just quit and start over."

"And do *what?"* Scara demands, furiously jabbing his hotkeys. "Minimum wage is not enough to live on, Cyno, and that's all I'm qualified for. We can't all be successful entrepreneurs."

"Hey, I didn't build my business overnight. It took a lot of fucking work, and I barely broke even the first couple of years."

"Yeah? And how did you eat?"

"Uh… Well, I got a loan and my dad helped out, but-"

"My dad left before I was born," Scara snaps. "And my mom kicked me out after I failed out of college because she got sick of how depressed I was, and then I was homeless for almost two years before I got a job at Walmart that paid $8 an hour, and I was eating nothing but ramen noodles twice a day for months just trying to save up enough money to get a roof over my head. So yeah, I'm sure you put in a lot of hard work. But sometimes hard work only gets you the bare minimum you need to survive, and the rest of it's a crapshoot."

Cyno is quiet for a moment before he says, "Okay, so you've been through some shit-"

"Yeah, I've been through some shit! And these asshole clients are the only reason I can afford real food and a bus pass. So don't fucking come at me and tell me I can just get out like it's easy. This is how I live. This is how I *survive.* And you know what? Even though these guys treat me like shit, this is still the happiest I've ever been in my life. Isn't that fucking pathetic?"

Scara pants heavily into the silence. He eventually calms himself down with a few deep breaths. God, he's never said all that out loud before. Scara doesn't tell anyone what he does for work or how it's affected him. He never even told his therapist. He was too ashamed of it. Maybe she would've been able to help him, but honestly, what could she even do? Scara *has* to do this. There's no other way.

"Look, I'm not going to pretend I know what you've been through," Cyno says in his usual no-nonsense way. "Sounds like it was pretty

rough. But that doesn't mean you're stuck where you are. It doesn't mean things can't get better for you. You're actually a pretty cool girl, and you deserve more than what you're letting yourself have. Honestly, it is kind of pathetic that you think you're happy right now when you're clearing fucking not."

Scara snorts. "Well, you've got me there."

"Yeah, I know," Cyno replies with a little chuckle. "You could go back to school."

"I hated school," Scara protests.

"So did I. C's get degrees, baby." He laughs again. "Any idea what you'd want to do as a career?"

Scara tsks. "I'm thirty-one. It's too late to start a career."

"It's never too late," Cyno disagrees. "You're the only one that can improve your own life, Scara. It's just like with Sethos: You have to want to get better. If you don't, then you're just gonna stay where you are forever."

Scara balks, immediately protesting, "That's not the same thing."

"Oh, but it is, girlie," he insists. "You can't be afraid of change forever, or you'll never grow."

"Shut up," Scara snaps. "What the fuck do you know about growth? You've been chasing the same fucking guy who hates your guts for months."

Cyno chuckles in response. "That's a good point, actually. Fuck!" he swears as he goes down. "Okay, I feel like it's time to abandon these nerds."

"Definitely," Scara says immediately. "This rogue is fucking trash."

"It's always a rogue, man. Something about 'em just attracts the worst fucking players every time." He quickly types in the chat that it was a good try but they've got to go, and Scara just says nothing and leaves the instance. "Tell you what, babycakes: I'll make you a deal."

"A deal?" Scara repeats.

"Yeah. You think about what career you want to get into, and I'll have a little chat with Sethos."

"Really? You won't just help your cousin out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Of course I will," says Cyno. "Just do this one little thing for me."

Scara sighs. Cyno *does* kind of a have a point. Scara can't keep this up forever. It's mentally taxing, and it's not what he wants for himself. He has kind of felt stuck. But he can at least try to get out of this loop, right? Try to make a better life for himself? He doesn't have to accept this just because it's where he landed. It's good money, sure, but it takes a toll on him.

"Fine," he says. "I'll think about it."

"Yeah, that's my girl."

"I'm not your girl."

"Right, 'cause you're Sethos' girl," Cyno teases.

"I'm not his girl either," Scara says testily.

"But you want to be. Don't you?"

Scara bites his lip. "No."

"Liar. You *like* him."

"What are you, twelve? Shut the fuck up." He rolls his eyes. "I'm gonna log off and watch Demon Slayer."

"Okay, have fun!" Cyno calls out.

"Fuck you," Scara replies, ending the call.

***

Cyno's got this. He has a plan. It's not the most well-thought-out plan, but it's his plan, and it'll totally work.

"Hey, Sethos," he says.

"Yeah?"

"How you feeling, man?"

Sethos is quiet for a second, and Cyno can just picture him cocking his

head. "Uh… good? How are you?"

"Are you lying?"

"Wha-?" Sethos stutters. "No!"

"I think you're lying."

"I'm not lying! Things are good, mostly. Why would I lie about that?"

"What does 'mostly' mean?" he presses.

Sethos huffs. "What are you getting at, Cyno? What is the point of this conversation?"

"I don't know, man. You've been through a lot. I just want to make sure you're okay."

His cousin lets out a long sigh. "You've been talking to Scara, huh?"

"Maybe," says Cyno.

"I don't need therapy."

"Of course you don't," Cyno agrees easily. "'Cause you're a real man, not a sissy boy."

Sethos sputters and says, "Therapy doesn't make you a sissy boy!"

"Doesn't it?"

"No!" he exclaims. "Getting in touch with your emotions is healthy."

"Nah, you don't need that shit."

He's quiet a for a moment before he asks, "Cyno, are you trying to reverse psychology me into going to therapy?"

Cyno frowns. "Is it working?"

"No!" Sethos shouts.

"Fuck. Well, it was the best plan I could come up with."

"You dumb… dumbass."

Cyno gasps and says, "Sethos! How could you use such filthy language?"

"Oh, shut up." He sounds a little bit annoyed. "I don't know if I like the idea of you and Scara talking about me behind my back."

"We talk about you all the time," Cyno admits.

Sethos scoffs. "Well, *stop!"*

"We'll stop when you get help with your mental health, and not a second before."

He groans over the line. "I can't believe you would betray my trust like that."

"I would never betray you!" Cyno exclaims. "This is for your own good." Sethos continues to huff and groan. Cyno's losing him. He has to think quickly. "How come you never told me you were all depressed and shit?"

"I-" Sethos makes a handful of unintelligible noises.

"I thought we were close."

"We are!"

"So why didn't you tell me I was making it worse?" Cyno asks him. "You should've told me."

"I- I just-" Sethos grunts. "I didn't want to worry you over nothing."

"Doesn't sound like nothing, man."

"How much did she tell you?" Sethos demands.

"She just said you were having a bad time and that you're still probably having a bad time because you never got better, you just learned how to ignore it."

Sethos scoffs again. "What? Is that what she thinks?"

"That's what she said, dude."

"Okay, well she doesn't know what the fuck she's talking about," he snaps. "I'm fine, Cyno. I'm managing."

Cyno pauses for a moment before saying seriously, "You're drowning, aren't you?"

Sethos doesn't answer. Cyno purses his lips and waits for him to respond. He can't just let Sethos wave this off. Scara's a girl, so she knows this type of emotional stuff, and if she says he's having a hard time then he probably is.

Cyno and Sethos never really talk about that stuff. They talk, sure. They talk a lot. But it's never deep shit like this, it's all just what's going on in their lives and what they're up to. Maybe Scara's right and that is partly Cyno's fault for never pushing to find out what was bothering him. Because he did kind of know something was up, he just didn't want to go too far. Sethos is a real nice guy, but he's a little naive about some things. The last thing Cyno wants is to upset him by saying something insensitive.

What Scara told him really scared him, though. Cyno doesn't want to think about what would happen if Sethos wasn't here anymore. He says it's in the past, but is it really? If he still has those kind of thoughts, Cyno has to make sure he gets help. It's his job as the older cousin.

"Look, Sethos," he says gently when it's clear Sethos isn't going to answer the question. "I love you, man. I know I don't tell you enough. You know I'm not all… emotional about this kind of stuff. But when Scara told me what you told her, it freaked me out a little. I don't like thinking you're going through all that alone. I want to be here for you. Okay?"

He can hear Sethos breathing shakily over the line. He sounds like he might be crying. Cyno *cannot* fuck this up.

"I'm gonna ask you one more time," he says in a soft, calming tone. "How you feeling, man?"

Sethos lets a choked sob. "I- I'm not good, Cyno. I'm struggling. A lot."

"Yeah? Why don't you tell me about it?"

They spend the next three hours on the phone, and by the end of it, Cyno finally manages to wrangle a shaky promise out of him. After he hangs up the call, a single tear rolls down his cheek. He sniffs, quickly wiping it away. He doesn't even remember the last time he cried.

He types out a quick message to Scara.

Cyno: He said he'll go

Scara: Really?

Cyno: Yeah

Scara: Thank you, Cyno

Cyno: Hey Scara?

Scara: What?

Cyno: Thanks

Scara: For what?

Cyno: For caring about him enough to say something
Cyno: I know you do, so don't even try to deny it
Cyno: I think you two could be really good together

Scara: There's a lot you don't know about me Cyno

Cyno: I know that Sethos likes you, and I know that he's an excellent judge of character. That's enough for me
Cyno: You keep up your end of the deal?

Scara: I'm trying
Scara: I've been thinking about graphic design

Cyno: Oh yeah? I didn't know you were an artist

Scara: I've been drawing all my life, and I taught myself Photoshop
Scara: I don't know, it's probably not a very realistic career choice

Cyno: You can do anything you put your mind to
Cyno: You got any good community colleges down in AZ?

Scara: Yeah there's a couple
Scara: It's actually cheaper than I thought
Scara: This might actually be doable

Cyno: Fucking told you so

Scara: I knew you'd say that
Scara: Asshole
Scara: Thank you
Scara: ASSHOLE

Cyno: You're welcome babygirl

Scara: You think Tighnari would be okay with you calling me that?

Cyno: It's a joke

Scara: Oh yeah? So if I screenshot it and send it to him you think he'll laugh?
Scara: I grabbed the screenshot before you edited it

Cyno: Bitch do NOT

Scara: Look at you going from babygirl to bitch in .2 seconds
Scara: What are you even doing with Tighnari you dumbass?

Cyno: Nunya business

Scara: Oh you think that'll stop me?
Scara: He's never gonna fuck you dude

Cyno: We'll see about that

Chapter 10: Merry Christmas, I'm Divorcing You

Chapter Notes

> YOU'RE ALL WONDERFUL AND I FINISHED THREE CHAPTERS TODAY SO HAVE ANOTHER ONE AHHH
>
> For reference, this is Scara's dress and this is Nari's. Thank you Dessa for finding them for me. Nari does play a female character just so's ya know. I don't think I've mentioned that. Oops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christmas Eve falls on a Saturday that year, and the guild forgoes raid night to attend a gala at Kaveh's house. It was his idea, of course. He insisted they dress for the occasion and turn on RP walk. He's spent the last three weeks redecorating his island mansion in winter themes. It's been pure fucking suffering for Alhaitham, but he's endured. It makes Kaveh so happy, and Alhaitham likes to see him happy. Honestly, he'd do fucking anything if it made Kaveh happy.

The intensity of his feelings for Kaveh has really surprised him. It feels like they're still growing every day. It sometimes freaks him out when he thinks about the fact that Kaveh lives on the opposite coast, and there's always the chance he breaks up with Alhaitham before they ever even meet. He's really excited for the Aspen trip, but also nervous.

Everything is so different with Kaveh. Alhaitham still wonders why sometimes, why Kaveh is the one person he's ever felt like he can open up to. Is he putting too much on Kaveh? It feels like he's just dumping his feelings sometimes, but Kaveh always insists he wants to hear it. Alhaitham's a little suspicious of that. He trusts Kaveh, though—more than he trusts anyone else, at least. He trusts that Kaveh won't use it against him or pull the rug out from under him.

Tighnari and Kaveh have been on all day putting the finishing touches on the gala. Alhaitham joins the voice chat about half an hour before their usual start time to check in.

"How's it going, you two?" he asks them.

"No, we're not ready!" Kaveh squeals.

"We've still got half an hour, Kaveh," Tighnari says calmly. And then to Alhaitham he says, "He's freaking out."

Somehow that's not surprising at all. "This is a virtual party with our friends," he points out. "It doesn't have to be perfect."

"Shut up, you know nothing," Kaveh snaps. "I don't have enough mistletoe!"

"Kaveh, you have put up, like, seven mistletoe traps already," Tighnari says.

"I want everybody to be forced to kiss everybody else at least once," he insists.

Alhaitham raises an eyebrow. "Oh, so it's that kind of party."

Kaveh giggles, then immediately lets out a frantic scream. "Ah, my butler is wearing the wrong shoes! Those are not the shoes I told you to put on him, Tighnari!"

"Oh, my *God,"* Tighnari moans. "Alhaitham, please talk some sense into your wife."

"I'll take it from here," he says. "You're relieved from party planning duty."

"Thank you, Jesus."

"It's Alhaitham, but you're welcome," he says. Tighnari leaves the chat. "Babe-"

"Is that what you're wearing to the party?" Kaveh asks him.

"Yes. Why? What's wrong with it?"

Kaveh tsks. "No husband of mine is showing up to a Christmas gala in a top hat."

"The top hat is dignified," Alhaitham argues.

"No. Vetoed. Take it off."

"I'm not taking it off."

"Alhaitham, you take that fucking hat off right now-"

"Okay, you need to calm down."

"Don't tell me to calm down!" Kaveh shrieks.

They manage to get through the next thirty minutes, during which Alhaitham relents and removes his top hat in an attempt to keep Kaveh from screaming frantically. It doesn't work. However, Kaveh does immediately snap to a calm, dignified tone the moment their first guest arrives.

"Good evening, ma'am," he says, bowing before Scara's character in her elegant evening gown. "May I just say, you look ravishing tonight."

"You may." She makes a heart with her hands. "Did you buy that jacket from the shop?"

"I did, yes. My wallet screamed at me when I took it out."

She giggles and says, "It was worth it."

"Thank you, milady. I'll show you inside."

Scara oohs and ahhs over all Kaveh's decorations. Alhaitham greets Tighnari when he arrives, also wearing an evening gown that is much sluttier than Scara's.

"Nice outfit," Alhaitham tells him. "Did you pick it just to drive Cyno crazy?"

"Maybe," says Tighnari noncommittally. "You have a beautiful home."

"You were just here."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Are you going to show me inside?"

"Sure," he says. They both walk inside. "This is the entryway. Over there's a plant."

"Alhaitham!" Kaveh snaps. "It is a *foyer,* and that is a dendrobium I imported all the way from Inazuma."

"It's a very nice plant, Kaveh," says Tighnari.

"Thank you." Kaveh appears in the foyer and says, "You're banned from giving tours. Go tend the bar."

"Don't we have help for that?"

"I can only put three vendors in this house at a time," says Kaveh. "Go mix Scara a drink."

"I'll have a Sex on the Beach," Scara purrs.

"Keep it in your pants, your boyfriend's not here yet. And over *here* we have a lovely display of crafted jewelry from Fontaine-"

"Kaveh, why are you leading me towards the mistletoe trap?"

"'Cause you look hot," Kaveh purrs.

"Alhaitham, save me," says Tighnari.

"Sorry, can't, I got a date with a girl and a beach," Alhaitham says from the bar.

"No!" Tighnari yelps.

Cyno enters the chat. "Evening, lady and gentlemen-"

"Kaveh is kissing me non-consensually," Tighnari says immediately.

"Whoa-whoa-whoa, what the fuck-"

"You can go next, I'm not done yet," says Kaveh.

"Where are you?" Cyno demands. "I'll come rescue you, my love!"

"Too late, I've already defiled him."

"Noooo! I challenge you to a duel."

"No dueling in the house!" Alhaitham calls out.

"It's my fucking house, I'll do what I want!" says Kaveh.

"Since I'm your husband, this house is half mine."

"Yeah, if we get divorced."

"Merry Christmas, I'm divorcing you."

Kaveh gasps dramatically.

The rest of night proceeds in a similar vein. Alhaitham actually has a

great time, and it seems like everyone else does, too. Sethos gets surprisingly into the RP aspect of the night, putting on a posh British accent that he completely forgets about every time Scara flirts with him. Tighnari teases Cyno, and Kaveh keeps dragging people under the mistletoe. Alhaitham just goes along with whatever they come up with, laughing at their antics and occasionally joining in.

It's good to be among friends for the holidays. Alhaitham doesn't have a lot of happy memories of Christmas. He gets that it's an important holiday for some people, but he's never really cared for it. He hasn't celebrated since he was a kid. Looking around at them all, though, basking in their laughter and the warmth they bring on this cold December night, Alhaitham gets a little taste of Christmas magic for the very first time.

"That was fun," he says to Kaveh after everyone else has left. "This was a great idea."

"Really?" Kaveh asks, sounding surprised.

Alhaitham smiles. "Yeah. You're good at this kind of stuff. We should all meet up for real someday."

"Ah, yes!" Kaveh squeals. "We need to get everyone together."

"We'll talk about it after Aspen."

Kaveh hums and says, "Okay. Merry Christmas, Alhaitham."

"Merry Christmas, Kaveh. I love you."

"Love you, too. And…"

"And what?" Alhaitham prompts.

"Well, it's past midnight there, right?"

Alhaitham glances at the clock and says, "Yeah."

"So it's technically Christmas morning," Kaveh says with a teasing lilt. "Which means I can give you your present now."

"What present?"

Kaveh giggles. "I'll send it to you in Discord. Have a good night, baby. Hope you like it."

He leaves the chat. Alhaitham clicks over to their DMs, interest flaring in his gut. Is this what he thinks it is? Kaveh knows how much Alhaitham likes seeing him on video. He's recorded Kaveh a couple times, although he hasn't played them back much yet. He just likes knowing he has them, that he can look at Kaveh whenever he wants. He loves looking at Kaveh. He doesn't think he'll ever get tired of it. Kaveh's the most beautiful thing he's ever seen, prettier than sunsets and oceans and probably anything else, honestly.

His interest started with a photo of Kaveh at a restaurant with a friend of his. He posted it to their guild server, and Alhaitham remembers staring at it for several minutes, poring over the details. He didn't know which one Kaveh was at the time, and it drove him crazy for a while. He knew which one he wanted it to be, but it would probably look gay if he asked, so he never did. He just saved it to his PC. He'd open it sometimes and imagine Kaveh's voice. He always yelled at himself for doing it, but he didn't stop.

He didn't find out until months later that Kaveh *was* the hot one, and that was when his obsession started. He turned on notifications for that channel, even though he hates getting notifications from group servers. He suffered through so many stupid pictures just to see Kaveh's occasional photos. Alhaitham saved every last one. He has them in a folder on his desktop. The videos are even better, of course. He gets to see all of Kaveh, and it's so much hotter than he ever imagined.

Kaveh can never know. Because even though he loves Alhaitham, he doesn't understand how obsessed Alhaitham is with him. It consumes him entirely.

Maybe that's crazy for a guy who didn't even know what a crush felt like a few months ago. But now that Alhaitham has given himself permission to feel things, he finds himself feeling so much more than he ever thought possible. Kaveh haunts his every waking thought, and Alhaitham is slowly starting to realize that it's actually been that way for a long time. He wonders how he could have missed something so obvious. It's all so clear in hindsight.

The file comes through. Alhaitham clicks on it, but he has to wait for it to load. The still image is of Kaveh's face in front of a camera. Alhaitham's pulse picks up. "Come on," he groans, still waiting impatiently.

At last, the video starts to play. Kaveh fiddles with the camera for a

moment before pulling back and smirking. He backs up onto a large bed. He's wearing a mesh crop top and a tight thong that leaves little to the imagination. Alhaitham's arousal jumps up suddenly. He gasps and palms himself through his pants.

"Hey, baby," Kaveh purrs. He crosses his lean legs, and Alhaitham's eyes rove over the muscle in his thighs. "Thought I'd give you a little something to show you how much I love you."

He bends over, running a finger over his ankle and up his shin. He knows Alhaitham likes his legs. His hand dips around to his calf, then trails over his thigh. He leverages his legs open, bending his knee and giving Alhaitham a full view of the way his cock strains against the fabric of his thong. Alhaitham hisses, feeling his blood rush south. He was already half hard waiting for the video to load. With Kaveh spread open before him like a feast, he doesn't stand a chance.

Kaveh's hands run up his abs. "I know you want to touch me like this," he breathes. "I can't wait to feel your skin against mine. It's all I can think about." He flutters his eyelashes at the camera and says, "You drive me *crazy."*

Alhaitham was trying to draw this out a little, but he can't stop himself from digging into his pants and wrapping his fingers around his cock. Kaveh is so sexy. The way he's talking to Alhaitham right now has him so hot. *This is all for me,* he thinks. *No one else will ever get to see this.*

His fingers run over his exposed nipples, and he sighs. "You want to touch me here?" he asks. His hand trails up to his neck. "Here?" He thumbs his lower lip, his tongue darting out to wet the digit. "Here?"

Alhaitham shudders. God, he can't be this turned on already. He's not going to make it through this video. It's really just knowing that Kaveh is talking directly to him, that he recorded this knowing Alhaitham would watch it and get off to it. It feels intimate. It feels almost like he's there, close enough to touch.

"What about… here?" Kaveh asks breathily, his hand ghosting over his clothed cock. He lets out a little moan. "I want you to touch me so bad."

He starts to rub himself through the fabric, his eyes rolling back into his head as he whimpers. He's definitely playing it up, but Alhaitham is hanging on to every sound he makes.

"Promise me you will soon," Kaveh whispers. "I can't take it, Alhaitham. I need you."

Alhaitham starts to stroke himself fast, feeling himself approaching his peak. It feels like he should slow down, but the thing is, he really doesn't have to. He can watch this video as many times as he wants. He always comes so fast when it's Kaveh, and maybe he should be embarrassed, but he's really just that turned on watching him. It doesn't even matter what Kaveh is doing—Alhaitham can't look away.

Kaveh's hand slips under his thong, stroking himself out of view. He hasn't even taken his cock out, and already Alhaitham is coming. He stripes his hand with spunk, squeezing himself through it as Kaveh lets out breathy little moans. He reaches up with his other hand to pause the video.

He breathes heavily for a moment, his eyes fixed on the still frame. Kaveh is so beautiful. Alhaitham reaches out to the screen and says, "I'll touch you soon."

He quickly cleans up. It's pretty late for him, so he shuts down his PC and gets into bed, the dim light of his phone illuminating his face.

Alhaitham: Best present I've ever gotten

Kaveh: Awww ♥
Kaveh: How far did you get?

Alhaitham: Not far. Guess I'll have to try again

Kaveh: I'd be impressed if you made it all the way through

Alhaitham: Is that a challenge?

Kaveh: Absolutely

Alhaitham: I'll work on it
Alhaitham: Merry Christmas. Love you

Kaveh: Love you babe. Sleep well

Alhaitham smiles to himself and plugs in his phone. He goes to sleep with his thoughts full of Kaveh. His hair, his voice, his smile. Alhaitham is addicted. He wants more.

Three weeks, he tells himself. *Three weeks, and he's mine.*

***

Scara: *missed call*
Scara: Hey
Scara: Are you still mad at me?
Scara: I guess you are. That's fair. I'm sorry for going behind your back

Sethos: I trusted you

Scara: I didn't betray your trust. I know it doesn't feel like it right now honey, but I'm doing this for you

Sethos: Stop calling me honey

Scara: Okay

Sethos bites his lower lip. He hates being mad at Scara, but he *is* mad. She told Cyno things that he shared in confidence. And now he's supposed to share those things with a total stranger!

His appointment is in two hours. Sethos has been watching the clock nonstop. He only has one more patient, and then he's just going to sit at home and stew until the virtual meeting.

Why is he even doing this? He doesn't *have* to go to therapy. What happens if he doesn't? Nothing. He just keeps going on the way he's been going on all his life. His heart sinks at the thought. He doesn't want to just go on. He wants to be… happy. Really happy, not fake happy. It's not like there aren't good moments, but they're kind of ruined because Sethos knows a bad one is just around the corner.

Sethos has tried just not feeling bad. He's tried to force himself to be happy, and sometimes he manages to convince himself that he is. Things are a lot better than they used to be, is the thing. He's come a long way. But maybe Scara has a point that he doesn't have to do it all by himself. That it's okay to ask for help.

His heart is beating fast as he signs on to the appointment. The therapist is nice, but not overly nice. She says this will be an introductory session. Sethos nods along. That doesn't sound too bad. And then she starts asking him about every bad thing that's ever happened to him, and Sethos stutters.

"You don't have to share anything you're not ready to share," Nahida says gently. "It takes time to build trust."

"I'm not ready," he confesses. "I'm not ready for… any of this."

She smiles. "But you're here anyway. That's brave of you." Sethos rolls his eyes. He doesn't need to be patronized. "I mean it," she insists. "It seems to me like you've been ignoring things for a long time. It takes courage to turn around and face yourself. You've taken the first step. All you have to do now is keep showing up and putting in the work. I promise it will get easier."

"Okay," Sethos mumbles doubtfully.

He manages to get through the session. He lets out a sigh of relief once he finally leaves the call. That was… well, awkward, but actually not as bad as he was expecting. It was uncomfortable, but then, sometimes you have make yourself uncomfortable to grow.

He pulls up Discord, trying to think of something to say to Scara. He types out several long messages and deletes them. Finally he just sends one.

Sethos: Hey

Scara: Hey. How'd it go?

Sethos: It sucked

Scara: Yeah it sucks a lot in the beginning
Scara: It will help though. Promise

Sethos: If you say so

Scara: How are you feeling?

Sethos: Tired. Not sleepy just… drained

Scara: I'm sorry. Get some rest
Scara: It will get better, Sethos

Sethos: Everyone keeps saying that but I don't see how. There's nothing I can do to change anything. Talking about it won't make it so that stuff never happened. I just don't see the point of any of this. I'm handling myself just fine

Scara: I know you can handle yourself. You've been doing it for years. It's clear that you can do it
Scara: Talking about it won't change what happened, but it'll help you heal from it. You've been walking around with open wounds so long

you don't even know what it feels like not to be in pain. I promise there's more to life than this, Sethos. You can handle it, sure, but you can do so much more than that. You can thrive. You just have to learn how
Scara: Therapy is a tool. It won't make everything better. But it will help you change how you think about yourself, and that's the most powerful thing you can do
Scara: I know it's hard. It sucks. But it's going to get better. Push through. If you have the strength to do it alone then you have the strength to ask for help. Don't be ashamed of needing help. We all do. Being alone is miserable. Let us support you, please

Sethos starts to tear up, and he pushes the feeling away. What did he even do to make Scara care about him this much? He's just a guy. Just some random guy with a bunch of mental problems, apparently, and he has nothing to offer a girl like Scara. Why is she even still talking to him?

He wallows in his feelings for a while. Therapy is stupid. He was happier without it. But… that was probably because he was in denial about how terrible he felt. Maybe Scara is right, and he just has to get through the terrible part, and then it will get better.

He sighs. It doesn't *feel* like it's going to get better. But Sethos made a commitment, so he should stick to it. He said he would go, so he'll go, even though it's stupid and makes him feel even worse. He shuts his screen off and flips through Netflix until it's time for bed.

Before he goes to sleep, he pulls out his phone and finally replies to Scara.

Sethos: Fine. But if it doesn't work you owe me

Scara: Lol okay. What do I owe you?

Sethos: A picture of you

Scara: And what if I'm not what you expect?

Sethos: You're already so much more than I ever expected or even imagined. There's no way you could let me down

Scara: That's sweet of you to say
Scara: Okay, if therapy fails you I will send you a selfie

Sethos: 👀

Sethos: Now I kind of hope it doesn't work

Scara: It will work

Sethos: It better be a good selfie

Scara: Oh yeah? Good how?

Sethos bites his lower lip and tells her exactly what he wants.

***

Cyno has been falling asleep with Tighnari on the phone every night for the past three weeks. It feels intimate. It feels like it means something. Tighnari insists it doesn't, but Cyno just doesn't believe that anymore.

"Cynoooo," Collei whines.

"What?" Cyno asks her, lost in his own head.

She huffs. "Stop daydreaming about your crush. It's your turn."

"Oh, sorry." He plays a random card and goes back to thinking about Tighnari. Why is he still resisting? What can Cyno do to make him give in?

Collei's fist suddenly thumps on the table, and Cyno instantly snaps out of it, his eyes going wide.

"Collei," he says, worried, "what's wrong?"

"You just played Chinju Forest, and you have an odd number of elemental dice. What. Are. You. Doing."

Cyno sighs. "I'm sorry, Collei." He sets his cards down and brings a hand to his forehead. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

She crosses her arms and says, "I do."

"Oh, yeah?"

"You haven't asked Tighnari to be your boyfriend yet."

Cyno gives her a little smile. "That's… not how it works, Collei."

"Don't tell me that's not how it works," she insists. "That *is* how it

works. You like someone, you tell them, you date them, you get married."

"Collei, I love you," he says patiently, "but you're literally twelve years old. That's a little young to be giving relationship advice."

Collei lets out a long, drawn-out groan. She tosses her cards on the table. "You're making this way too complicated. Just ask him!"

"He's still insisting he hates my guts," Cyno points out. "He's not going to agree to be my boyfriend."

"Whatever." She huffs again, then holds out her hand. "Can I play the garden game on your phone?"

"Sure," says Cyno, handing it over.

A few minutes later, Collei lets out a little squeak. Cyno looks up and says, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says quickly, clicking the screen off.

Cyno narrows his eyes. "Collei… what did you do?"

She sighs and says, "I messaged Tighnari."

"What?" Cyno grabs the phone, his mind running through all of the very inappropriate things Tighnari could've said to her. "Collei, you can't do that."

He's panicking as he pulls up the Discord messages to see the damage. He scrolls up to the first message.

Cyno: Hi Tighnari will you be my boyfriend?

Tighnari: Um no?

Cyno: Why not?

Tighnari: Because you're a cretin??

Cyno: What does that mean? Does it mean you don't like me? Because I like you and I think we should be boyfriends

Tighnari: I've made it very clear that I hate you

Cyno: Then how come you always call me?

Tighnari: You're the one calling me

Cyno: You called me yesterday

Tighnari: That was just to say hi to Collei

Cyno: I made a TCG joke and you laughed. My TCG jokes are not even funny

Tighnari: What?? Did you just admit your jokes aren't funny? Tf is wrong with you, have you been taken over by an alien?

Cyno: No this is definitely Cyno. Please say yes to being my boyfriend so I can focus on my game

Tighnari: … Collei are you messaging me from Cyno's phone?

Cyno breathes a sigh of relief. Nothing inappropriate. He looks up at Collei and says, "You should not have done that."

"Well, you weren't going to do it," Collei says defensively.

Cyno shakes his head and messages Tighnari back.

Cyno: Sorry she took my phone. She told me she wanted to play a game. Little devil

Tighnari: Lmao she really wants us to be boyfriends huh?

Cyno: She does. Sorry about that

Tighnari: It's fine
Tighnari: She's just a kid, she doesn't understand

Cyno: I'm not sure I understand either tbh

Tighnari: Wdym?

Cyno: She has a point. Why don't you want to be my boyfriend?

Tighnari: I've told you this like a million times

Cyno: I'm being serious
Cyno: We talk every day. You like it when I flirt with you, and you flirt back. We fall asleep together. What are we doing here, Nari?
Cyno: Is it really just that you like the attention? Is that all this is to you?

Tighnari: I'm not ready for this conversation

Cyno: Okay. That's fine. I can wait
Cyno: Just do me a favor?

Tighnari: What?

Cyno: When you are ready… let me know?

Tighnari takes several minutes to reply. Cyno watches with bated breath as he types. He's expecting a long message, which is why it hits him like a brick when he gets it.

Tighnari: Okay

Okay. Okay? Cyno looks at his phone, wishing he would say something else, anything else.

"He said no, huh?" Collei asks quietly.

Cyno sighs and clicks the screen off. "It's fine," he lies. "I'm gonna… sweep the floor."

He gets out the broom and drags it through the shop, pretending to be okay for Collei's sake.

Chapter End Notes

RP walk: You know how you can make your characters walk instead of run? That's RP walk. Because when the fuck else would you WALK??

Sorry, Cyno. But hey, I actually managed to get all three pairings in this chapter. Hooray! I forgot there was smut in this one and then came here to post it and I was like ohhh that's pretty smutty huh. Kaveh getting naughty, ooo, you have all been blessed. And look at Collei living up to her demonic potential. This will not be the last time she interferes.

Next chapter is Aspen finally! It will be Haikaveh only. I've got a twist for you that no one will see coming. Alhaitham has plans. It'll be GREAT.

Chapter 11: Stand Up Right Now, You Fucking Clown

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kaveh doesn't get nervous. He does get a little… energetic, sometimes. He moves around a lot—taps his feet, drums his fingers. It's not because he's nervous, he just has a lot of energy to get out.

His plane arrived three hours before Alhaitham's. They're supposed to meet up at the hotel, where Kaveh is now. Waiting. (Kaveh is terrible at waiting, but he's doing it. He's doing it perfectly well, and he's totally fine. Really.)

He lasts all of twenty-three minutes in the lobby before he's calling a ride back to the airport. He'll just wait there. He'll get to see Alhaitham sooner then, right? It's not like he's anxious about it. He knows what Alhaitham looks like. Has already seen him naked multiple times. So there's really no reason to be anxious.

At the airport, Kaveh drinks three coffees. This is a mistake.

There's only one flight from Philadelphia, and it's delayed. Delayed. The flight is delayed. This is fine. It's completely fine, because Kaveh is capable of waiting for things like a normal person. Right? Right. Because he's perfectly normal and not a complete mess of a human being, and oh God, this was a mistake, wasn't it? Now Alhaitham is going to know how messy and annoying he is. They should've just kept this long-distance forever so Alhaitham doesn't grow to hate him like fucking everybody else in his life up to this point. Kaveh's very hateable. It's an innate feature of his personality. This has all been a terrible, terrible mistake, and he's always known he's not worthy of love anyway, so there's really no point in pretending, right? He should just get on the next plane back to California right now, right this second, where the fuck is the ticket counter-

"Kaveh? Hey."

Kaveh leaps back at the hand on his arm and lets out a little scream.

"Hey, it's just me." Alhaitham's brow furrows. "You okay?"

Kaveh blinks rapidly. That's Alhaitham, alright. That's him right there in front of Kaveh, in the flesh. Kaveh reaches out, his palm flattering over Alhaitham's chest. "Hi," he breathes softly.

Alhaitham cocks his head, his mouth pulling into a lopsided smirk. "Were you anxious about seeing me?"

"No," Kaveh denies instantly. He quickly pulls his hand back. "No, no, I wasn't."

"Uh-huh." Alhaitham nods, his smirk widening. "You were supposed to wait at the hotel."

"I- did," Kaveh says. "But you weren't there."

"And you just couldn't wait to see me, huh?"

Kaveh's brain finally catches up to what's happening. He lets out a breath, then laughs. "Hi," he says again, more normal this time.

"Hi, Kaveh."

He can tell Alhaitham is teasing him, so he reaches out to swat him on the arm. "Shut up."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were thinking it." Kaveh fires back his own smirk. "So," he says, stepping forward. "Are you going to sweep me into a big, romantic kiss in the middle of the airport or not?"

Alhaitham smiles. He slides the handle of his carry on from his shoulder and lets it fall to the ground. Kaveh's heart races. Alhaitham pulls him into his arms and dips him without warning. Kaveh yelps, hands flying around his neck. Alhaitham looks entirely too pleased with himself as he leans down, capturing Kaveh's lips with his own.

Kaveh takes in a sharp breath through his nose. The kiss is soft and slow, not really what Kaveh would expect from the guy who's been demanding he take his clothes off on video for months. Not like they can really do that here. Although, back in his heyday-

He whimpers as Alhaitham's tongue slides over his mouth, and everything else just melts away. Kaveh settles into the pair of strong arms holding him up, pressing into Alhaitham's chest. The kiss deepens, still slow but passionate. Kaveh breathes him in, brushing

Alhaitham's tongue with his own. His hand reaches up to Alhaitham's hair, digging into his scalp. They stay like that for a good minute, and there's no rush at all. It's the sweetest, most wonderful thing, and Kaveh never wants to leave the warm circle of his arms.

Eventually Alhaitham pulls him back up, and Kaveh whimpers again as they part. Alhaitham sets him gently back on the ground and says, "That romantic enough for you?"

He brings his fingers to his lips and nods mutely, a smile breaking out across his face.

Alhaitham's smirk returns. "Good." He grabs his carry on and slips his other hand into Kaveh's. "Where's baggage claim?"

Kaveh looks into his beautiful, mesmerizing eyes and says softly, "I have no idea."

Alhaitham chuckles and says, "Come on," pulling him along.

It takes Kaveh awhile to start acting normal. He just can't believe he's here. Alhaitham is stunning in person, especially his eyes. A camera really doesn't do them justice. Kaveh squeezes his hand in the Uber, chattering excitedly about the resort and the trip and anything else he can think of. It's mostly the coffee talking. Alhaitham listens and teases him, and Kaveh's heart thumps hard every time he smiles or smirks or really does anything at all with his mouth.

The resort they're staying at is very nice. Alhaitham told him to just relax in the lobby or head to the bar or check out the lounge—there's a lot to do here. Of course, Kaveh didn't do any of that. He just sat and stared at the sliding glass doors for less than thirty minutes before going back to the airport because he's desperate like that, apparently. They did take his luggage for him, but Alhaitham insisted he was not allowed to enter the room alone. He refused to explain why, but Kaveh gets a hint when the lady at the check-in counter says, "Enjoy your honeymoon."

"Thank you," Alhaitham replies, as if this is perfectly normal.

Kaveh follows him to the elevator, elbowing him as soon as the doors close. "Honeymoon?" he questions.

"You get extra perks," Alhaitham explains. He smiles and takes Kaveh by the waist. "I'm going to spoil the fuck out of you."

"Yeah, I could tell by the look of this place. Must've been crazy expensive to book for an entire week."

Alhaitham pulls him close, murmuring in his ear. "Only the best for you."

Kaveh giggles breathily. He pulls back with a teasing expression. "Who are you, and what have you done with the sarcastic asshole I know and love?"

"Oh, don't worry. I'm still a sarcastic asshole at heart." He brings a hand up to Kaveh's cheek. "It's really good to see you."

"You too." Kaveh leans in for a soft peck of the lips. "I've wanted to kiss you for so long. I can't believe we're both here… in this swanky hotel. In *Aspen.* On our *honeymoon."* He lets out an excited noise. "I just hope you didn't spend your entire savings on this trip."

"Don't worry about the money," Alhaitham insists. "You're not paying for a single thing while we're here."

Kaveh cocks his head. "Hang on. Is my boyfriend rich?" he asks. Alhaitham shrugs a shoulder in reply, and Kaveh's eyes go wide. "Wait, are you really?"

"Don't worry about it," he repeats.

"Okay," Kaveh singsongs. "Rich *and* hot? Why aren't you taken already?"

"I am."

Kaveh giggles. The elevator dings as they arrive at their floor. Alhaitham tugs Kaveh along down the hallway until they reach the correct door. Once Kaveh sees the placard, he says, "Ah. Honeymoon suite. Classy."

"I'm very classy," Alhaitham agrees.

Kaveh snorts. "Yeah, jerking it on camera is super classy of you."

"This isn't going to be like that," says Alhaitham as he opens the door.

"No?" Alhaitham waves him in, and Kaveh enters. "Then what's it going to-?" He abruptly cuts himself off.

It's like he's stepped into a palace. Everything is decked out in warm

colors, varying shades of brown with the occasional red-orange accent. Kaveh steps further into the room, which isn't a room at all but an entire *house* complete with gleaming wood furnishings, fresh flowers on every table, a bottle of champagne on ice, and a fucking fireplace. Kaveh covers his mouth with his hand and laughs into it.

He quickly explores the entire suite, exclaiming over everything with his eyes wide as saucers. Kaveh has never set foot in a place this nice. He's aware he's acting like a complete idiot, but it's all so gorgeous, he can't help himself. The entire thing looks like it came from the pages of a fairytale.

"Look at this scrollwork! Laser-etched!" he says, pointing to it, and, "Is this set in resin? Oh my God, how pretty!" followed by, "Okay, this tub is actual marble *and* it has jets?"

Alhaitham follows him around with a smile on his face and an occasional nod. At last Kaveh takes them into the bedroom and says, "Look at the stitching on this duvet." He runs his hand over it. "I almost hate to mess it up."

"Do you?" Alhaitham asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Ha!" Kaveh exclaims. "Not at all." He falls backward onto the bed with a contented sigh. "This is perfect. I couldn't have dreamed anything better."

"Yeah?" Alhaitham crawls onto the bed, caging Kaveh in. "You like it?"

Kaveh throws his arms around Alhaitham's neck and nods. "Mhmm."

"How about we get in the bath?" he suggests. "Wash off all the travel? And then I'll keep you naked for the rest of the night."

"Oo-ooh," Kaveh coos. "What kinds of filthy things are you going to do to me tonight, baby?"

"All of them," Alhaitham replies.

"All of them?"

"All of them," he confirms with a nod.

Kaveh bites his lower lip. "Sign me up."

Alhaitham smirks and pulls Kaveh up off the bed. Kaveh laughs and follows him into the bathroom, where they undress each other with

careful hands. Kaveh isn't used to this. The sweet, gentle touches, the soft kisses over his skin. He shivers when Alhaitham presses his lips to the top of his spine.

"Alhaitham?" he breathes, reaching back to grip his hand.

"Yeah?"

"I don't mind if it's… slow, tonight. This is nice. You don't have to-" He stops, feeling self-conscious.

Alhaitham hums, trailing his lips over Kaveh's shoulder. "You don't want the usual dirty talk?"

"I mean, you can if you want to," he says quickly.

"What do *you* want, Kaveh?" Alhaitham asks, turning him around and holding his hips.

"I- Just-" Kaveh huffs as the words escape him. His eyes dart away. "I'm never like this, I swear."

Alhaitham brings a hand up to his cheek again. Kaveh whimpers and leans into it. "I want to show you what you mean to me tonight. Is that okay?"

"Yeah." Kaveh smiles softly. "I love you. I'm so happy we're here."

"I love you, too. More than anything."

He leans in for a sweet kiss. The heat starts to ramp up between them. Kaveh clutches him desperately, chasing the taste of him.

Alhaitham breaks away. "Bath first."

Kaveh giggles and says, "Okay."

They fill up the tub and climb inside. Alhaitham sits behind Kaveh, pulling him up against his chest. He works soap into his skin in an expert massage that has Kaveh sighing and humming in pleasure.

"You're good at this," Kaveh murmurs.

"I know."

He huffs. "Egomaniac."

"You paid me a compliment, and I accepted. How does that make me an egomaniac?"

"Just the way you said it," Kaveh insists. "'I know,' like it's obvious that you're better than everyone."

"I am objectively better than everyone, though."

Kaveh huffs again and says, "I agree, actually."

"You should, as my boyfriend." He presses his fingers into the back of Kaveh's neck. "You're a little tight here."

"Mm," Kaveh hums. "Not just there."

"Yeah?" Alhaitham's breath ghosts over the shell of his ear. He trails his fingers down Kaveh's back. "Where else?"

"Lower," says Kaveh. He shivers as Alhaitham brushes the base of his spine. "Lower," he repeats.

He whimpers as Alhaitham's finger finally presses against his entrance. "Here?" he asks.

"Mhmm. Right there."

Alhaitham massages his hole but doesn't enter. Usually Kaveh is the kind of guy to get right to it, but it's nice to just sit and enjoy the anticipation. Alhaitham kisses his ear and the side of his neck. Kaveh leans into him, lifting his hips. Alhaitham's lips travel to his shoulder, where he bites down. Kaveh jerks against him, letting out a soft moan.

"You like that?" Alhaitham whispers, and starts scraping his teeth all over Kaveh's skin.

"God, yes," he breathes.

The moment Alhaitham pushes inside, Kaveh keens. It's just the slightest touch, but it feels so good. Kaveh lets himself sink onto Alhaitham's finger, nestling it even deeper in his ass.

"Yes, baby," he moans.

Alhaitham is busy at work on Kaveh's neck. He leaves him a couple of bruises that have Kaveh gasping and wriggling against him. He loves the feeling of Alhaitham's finger inside him, teasing him just right. He

grinds against it.

Alhaitham's other hand grips his hip. "Hold still."

"I can't," Kaveh whines. "Feels too good."

He hears Alhaitham hiss behind him. "You're so beautiful. Tell me what you want, Kaveh."

"You," he replies, reaching back to grab Alhaitham's thigh. "Any way I can have you. I want you everywhere. Baby, please."

"Anything you want, baby." Alhaitham kisses his neck again, softly. "Anything."

Kaveh whines. "Bed," he says. "Take me to bed."

Alhaitham pulls him out of the tub and dries him off so slowly, so carefully. Usually Kaveh would protest because he's too horny for this type of shit, but honestly, even though he wants the dick, he also wants to see what Alhaitham will do. What he's actually like when he's not just doing what he thinks Kaveh wants. Alhaitham really does put a lot of energy into pleasing him. He doesn't always get it right, but he just keeps trying.

He walks Kaveh back into the bedroom while they kiss, their lips never parting. It's a slow stumble, but Alhaitham doesn't seem to be in any kind of rush. He's taking his time with this. Like he wants to do it properly. Kaveh feels a sudden surge of affection for him.

"I love you," he whispers, finally laying flat on the bed and looking up at Alhaitham.

He cards his fingers through Kaveh's hair and says, "I love you. So much."

For some reason, Kaveh feels the prick of tears in his eyes. He blinks them away, reaching up for Alhaitham and pulling him down. Their kisses are more heated than before. He leaves briefly to grab lube, squeezing it out over his palm before taking Kaveh in hand. Kaveh gasps and arches in him.

"Yes," he breathes. "Ohh, Alhaitham."

He feels the pressure shift, and then Alhaitham is grabbing them both with one hand. Kaveh shudders as their cocks glide together. He

purposefully doesn't chase the high because he knows this is only the beginning. He just lets Alhaitham take whatever he wants, because he knows that as long as it's him it's going to feel amazing.

Alhaitham eventually lets go, sighing as he pulls away. "Fuck," he murmurs, shakily grabbing the bottle. "I'll come just from looking at you make that face."

Kaveh lets out a giggle that becomes a gasp as Alhaitham enters him again. "Oh, baby," he murmurs.

Alhaitham works him open nice and slow. By the time he's done Kaveh is desperate for it. He fucks himself on Alhaitham's fingers, moaning at the feeling of the warm digits inside of him. God, he wants something bigger. He wants it so bad he's shaking with it.

"Fuck me, baby. Please, *please-"*

"Anything you want, Kaveh."

Kaveh cries out as Alhaitham's fingers leave him. Their eyes connect, and Kaveh feels a deep bond settle between them. He's never felt anything like it before. Alhaitham doesn't look away as he pushes inside, watching Kaveh's mouth fall open as he takes it. Kaveh inhales shakily with every inch of his cock as it slides in, filling him up.

Finally, as he bottoms out, Alhaitham reaches up to brush Kaveh's hair out of his face. Kaveh pushes against his hand with a whimper.

"You feel so good," Alhaitham whispers.

Kaveh wants to say something back, but it just comes out as a garbled moan. He shifts his hips, begging for more with his body. His eyes plead with Alhaitham, trying to communicate what he's feeling.

"Don't worry, baby," Alhaitham says. "I've got you."

Eyes still locked, he thrusts in and out of Kaveh's ass. Noises come from Kaveh's throat, noises he's not even conscious of making. He just can't help it. He feels so much, a mix of love and sheer, blinding adoration. It's overwhelming in the best way.

Alhaitham flattens his palms on either side of Kaveh's head and fucks him deeply, never once looking away. Kaveh can only stare into his eyes and take it. He feels the urge to close them as the pleasure climbs, but he can't. He wants to keep looking in Alhaitham's eyes

forever because he can just *tell* how much Alhaitham loves him, and the attention is everything he's ever wanted.

Kaveh realizes all at once that this is the kind of attention he's been looking for his whole life. Now he has it, and he knows in that moment that he'll never let it go, not for anything.

Alhaitham reaches down, and Kaveh pushes into his hand. He holds Alhaitham's face just in case he tries to look away, though Kaveh knows he won't. He comes with a long, sharp cry, shuddering through a powerful orgasm. Alhaitham's thrusts become hard and choppy, and Kaveh is still in the midst of riding it out when he feels the come spurt into his ass. The look of bliss on Alhaitham's face says everything.

Kaveh clings to him as they adjust to lie side by side, cuddling and panting in bed. Kaveh still won't let him look away. His hands cup Alhaitham's cheeks, and he feels the tears come again. *Dammit.*

"It's okay, Kaveh," Alhaitham says gently. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Never leave me," Kaveh whispers.

"I won't."

The tears spill, and Kaveh buries his head in Alhaitham's chest. He doesn't even know why he's crying. He just feels like every nerve in his body is raw right now. He doesn't cry for long, but Alhaitham keeps holding him.

A few minutes later, Alhaitham asks, "You okay?"

"Yeah." Kaveh pulls back, looking up at him a little shyly. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Alhaitham kisses his forehead.

"Seeing you is just…" He gives him a tiny smile. "I'm so happy we could be together, even if it's just for a little while."

"We've got a whole week together," Alhaitham reminds him. "And I'm not going to waste a second of it."

***

Seeing Kaveh for the first time is probably what it's like to see an angel, honestly. A divine experience. Damn, that's corny, but that doesn't make it any less true.

Alhaitham doesn't get nervous. But… he did get a little antsy on the plane. He snapped at somebody who tried to cut him off in the aisle after they landed. He's on his way to meet the love of his life, here! Over the last few weeks it's become clear to Alhaitham that Kaveh means a lot to him, more than he ever could've predicted, and this trip is the perfect time to express that.

As they lie in bed that night, Alhaitham's heart finally settles. Kaveh knows. He knows, and he feels the same way. There's no hiding that, no faking it. They're on the same page. It feels good knowing Kaveh loves him like that. Alhaitham never thought anyone would love him like that, yet here they are.

True to his word, Alhaitham treats Kaveh to the most romantic pseudo-honeymoon of his life. He doesn't even let Kaveh leave the bed until the next morning, bringing him champagne and waiting on him hand and foot. Kaveh teases him about it, but Alhaitham doesn't mind. Kaveh makes him want to be romantic. He's never done anything like this—never felt the desire or the need. What he feels for Kaveh is just so big, he feels like he has to scream it.

They do make it up into the snow-covered mountains eventually, and Alhaitham teaches him to ski. Kaveh actually isn't too bad. Alhaitham still laughs every time he falls on his ass, but Kaveh is laughing, too. They cuddle up by the fireplace after, sipping hot chocolate and whispering secrets to each other.

Alhaitham makes sure to save his surprise for the end of their trip. They're leaving tomorrow morning. He just wants a little something to remember their getaway. It's been so perfect. He knows it has to end, but he has to make sure Kaveh never forgets how much he loves him.

He does it at dinner. It's a cute little place, nice and cozy with the lights set low. Alhaitham watches Kaveh smile the whole night through, thinking, *I couldn't possibly love him more.*

"I never want this night to end," Kaveh sighs into his wineglass.

Alhaitham gives him a little smile and says, "Hey, Kaveh? Can I ask you a question?"

Kaveh gives him a suspicious look. "Depends on the question."

"I can't tell you what it is before I ask you."

"Well then, I reserve the right to say 'hell no' and slap you across the

face."

"You can if you want," says Alhaitham. "But you'll be breaking my heart."

Kaveh cocks his head for a moment. Then he laughs and says, "Alright, whatever. Ask me."

Alhaitham slides out the booth and gets down on one knee.

Kaveh's eyes go wide. "What the hell are you doing?" he asks with a horrified expression.

"Kaveh, you mean the world to me."

"Alhaitham, don't," Kaveh hisses. He glances around them. People are watching them.

"I always thought I was too fucked up for love," Alhaitham goes on, ignoring his plea. "But then I met you. It took me way too long to put a name to what I feel for you. In the end, it was actually a lot simpler than I thought."

Kaveh looks panicked. He leans in to say under his breath, "Stand up right now, you fucking clown."

"Kaveh," he says seriously. He reaches into his pocket. "Will you marry me…" He takes out the piece of paper and unfolds it. Kaveh looks even more confused. And then Alhaitham adds, "In Genshin?"

His face goes through a whole range of emotions. First it's bedwilderment. Then a blank expression. Then realization. And then he's shaking his head and saying, "Oh, you fucking asshole."

Alhaitham grins. Kaveh snatches the paper out of his hands.

"You ordered the wedding package," he says. "You got down on one knee in the middle of a fucking restaurant on the most romantic vacation of my life and handed me a fucking-" He waves the paper furiously. *"Receipt* for a wedding ceremony in a *video game."*

"Are you going to answer the question?" Alhaitham asks him.

"No," Kaveh says immediately. He slams the paper down on the table and starts to rant, "No. Never. You dumb motherfucker. I cannot believe you. Where do you get the *audacity?* I will never forgive you for this!"

He's smiling the whole time. Alhaitham smiles back and stands up, then leans in to kiss him. "I'm sorry," he murmurs.

"No *the fuck* you are not!" Kaveh claims, smacking him on the arm. He lets out a disbelieving laugh. "You scared the shit out of me."

"You're really not going to marry me?"

Kaveh laughs breathlessly, shaking his head. "Of course I will." He smacks him again. "Fucking idiot."

Alhaitham sits back down, and they finish their dinner. They get so many weird looks. Kaveh keeps blushing and saying, "I can't believe you!" over and over again. Alhaitham is far too proud of himself to wipe the shit-eating grin from his face. It remains there for the rest of the night.

When it's time to say goodbye, Alhaitham holds him tight. "We'll have to meet up again soon," he says as he pulls back.

"Obviously," says Kaveh. His face lights up. "You know what we should do?"

"What?" Alhaitham asks him.

"We should take everyone to an anime con. There's one in LA in a couple months."

"A couple months?" Alhaitham repeats.

Kaveh smiles. "Aw, I know. But I don't have infinite time off."

Alhaitham sighs, reaching to tuck Kaveh's hair behind his ear. "Back to the classy video calls, then." He half-smiles. "I think a con's a great idea. LA is close enough for most of you, although Cyno and I will have a long flight."

"We could go somewhere else."

"We'll have to see what works for everyone. I'll post something in the server."

Kaveh nods eagerly. "Okay." Then he pouts. "I don't want to say goodbye."

"Me either." He takes a deep breath and steps away. "I love you. Message me when you get home."

"I will. Love you." Kaveh reaches out for him, then lets his hand fall. His eyes look wet. "Until next time."

Alhaitham nods. He forces himself to step away now, or else he knows he never will. It feels like his heart cracks a little as he walks away from Kaveh, knowing it'll be awhile before they can see each other again. He starts making plans in his head. Will he move to California, or will Kaveh move to Philadelphia? Maybe they could both go somewhere new. Have an adventure. As long as they're together, he doesn't care.

He spends the whole flight home thinking about the wedding.

Chapter End Notes

> Look, LOOK, we finally mentioned the anime con we've been building towards for literally the entire fic! Aren't you proud of me? It's still probably going to take us like another 20-30k to get there but... There's a lot of stuff that needs to happen in between, okay? And God knows how many chapters it's going to take to actually get through the con. I have a lot planned. I would love it if I could get this fic to over 100k total because that's been a goal of mine even since I broke 50k but we'll have to see what happens. This is definitely going to be the longest thing I've ever written which is really exciting! And it seems you're all loving it, which makes me so happy! Ah my readers are wonderful people. Hope you continue to enjoy the chaos with me.
>
> As for this chapter, what do we think of the super romantic proposal? Alhaitham is a menace. The next few chapters are going to be hella dramatic and emotional, so I hope you enjoyed the fluff. Prepare yourselves for it to get complicated.

Chapter 12: So What If You're Hot? It's Not Like I'd Ever Kiss You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tighnari is losing it. He must be losing it. There's no other explanation for the way he gets breathless every time he talks to Cyno. What, has he forgotten how to breathe now? Fucking stupid. There is, of course, one other explanation that makes sense, but Tighnari staunchly refuses to acknowledge this.

He's in the voice channel with Sethos and Cyno when he gets the ping from Discord. He tabs over to check it, his eyes quickly scanning the text. His heart thumps loudly in his chest. He stares at it, reading it through it twice more.

"Nari, what the fuck?" says Cyno.

"Sorry," he says quickly, tabbing back to the game. Cyno is dead. Tighnari quickly rezzes him.

"You got more important things to do than keep me alive so I can keep the literal hordes of big, ugly monsters off your ass?"

Tighnari gulps. "There's a ping from Alhaitham in the server."

"Well, yeah, I heard it," says Cyno, "but unlike some people, I have a functioning attention span."

Sethos snorts and says, "No, you don't." It's quiet for a moment before he yelps, "Ah! What?"

"You saw it?" Tighnari asks him.

"Yeah!" Sethos says, laughing. "That would be so fun!"

"Alright, what is it?" Cyno asks.

"There's an anime con in LA in March," Sethos tells him. "He's asking if we all want to meet up there."

"Wait, really?" Cyno gasps. "Dude, *yes.* Nari, are you going?"

"No," Tighnari says quickly.

"Why not?" he demands.

Tighnari shrugs and says, "I'm busy."

"With what?"

"I'm not going," he insists.

"Aw, come on. You don't want to see everybody?" The battle ends, and Tighnari instantly leaves the party. "Hey, where are you going? We were gonna run Peak after this."

"I have to go." He leaves the chat, ripping his headset off. He clicks over to Discord and reads the message again.

He can't see Cyno in person. There's no way. He just knows he'll crack immediately. Look what happened when he saw a photo of him for the first time! Tighnari has to be sensible about this. He *has* to be sensible. He wasn't sensible last time, and it fucking destroyed him.

Cyno wouldn't do that, he thinks, and he wants to believe it—desperately—but he can't. What kind of fucking idiot makes the same mistake twice? No. This can't happen.

Tighnari logs off and tries his best to distract himself, ignoring the Discord messages on his phone. It's probably just Cyno begging him to come to the con because he knows as well as Tighnari does that meeting up would be explosive. Tighnari won't be able to see him without touching him, he won't be able to touch him without kissing him, and he won't be able to kiss him without begging for his cock. Because Tighnari is weak, and all the logic in the world can't make him stop wanting Cyno.

He's really not sure when it got this bad. One day Cyno was an annoying dumbass that wouldn't quit flirting with him and the next he was an adorable, quirky heartthrob who makes Tighnari laugh and blush and just genuinely makes him *happy*. He knows it's his fault for encouraging it, but in his defense, he really thought Cyno would've given up by now.

But Cyno hasn't given up, even though Tighnari rebuffs his advances every time they speak. He's somehow managed to worm his way so deep into Tighnari's life that it's hard to imagine what things would be like without him. The smart move here would be to leave the guild

entirely, block them all and never look back. Tighnari's heart aches in his chest just thinking about it. He can't do that. They're his friends. And Cyno is his… nothing. Cyno is his *nothing,* he's not Tighnari's at all, no matter how much he wants to be.

After an hour of puttering around his apartment mindlessly cleaning things that are already clean, Tighnari finally gives in and checks his messages on his phone.

Cyno: You're really not gonna go?
Cyno: It's because of me, isn't it?
Cyno: If you don't want to see me I won't go. But you should. I know you'll have a great time

Tighnari whimpers in his throat. Goddamn *Cyno* being all *considerate.* Why couldn't he have just been an asshole about it? It would've made it so much easier to say no. He probably knows that, though, and that's why he's being nice instead. This is just a guilt trip. And the worst part is that it's kind of working.

Tighnari: You'd have more fun than I would. I'm sure they wouldn't want to see me anyway

Cyno: Nah, come on. You know everybody loves you. I'm just a dork who tells excellent jokes

Tighnari: And I'm a sarcastic piece of shit who does nothing but yell at everyone and cause chaos
Tighnari: This game brings out the worst in me. I should stop playing. I should just find some other hobby

Cyno: Can I call you?

Tighnari: Fine

He settles into the couch, waiting for the call to come through. He picks up as soon as it rings and says, "Don't try to talk me into it."

"I won't," Cyno promises. "But I will tell you that our friends care about you a lot, and if you just stopped showing up to raids, I guarantee at least one of these animals would track you down and fly out to Seattle just to make sure you're alright. They're crazy. They'll do it."

Tighnari smiles despite himself. "You mean you'd do it."

"Promise me you won't disappear on me."

Tighnari bites his lip. "I…" He sighs.

"Look," says Cyno seriously. "I know you have your reasons for keeping your distance. You've been hurt. It makes sense to be cautious. And I know I haven't made it easy for you 'cause every time I'm around you I can't help acting like a fucking idiot."

"True."

"Yeah. It's 'cause I like you. A lot. But I never want to make you feel like you have to do something you're not ready for."

"Cyno," he says quietly. "I don't know if I'll ever be ready. I don't want you to just sit around forever waiting for me. That's not fair to you."

"Fuck fair. Nari, if there is even a 1% chance I get to have you someday, I will never stop trying. I'll never back off. Not unless you ask me to."

Tighnari swallows. He shouldn't have let Cyno call him. This is all spiraling out of his control.

"And I'll do it the second you ask, too," Cyno goes on. "But I know you won't ask. 'Cause you and I both know there's something here, between us. A real big kind of something."

He breathes shakily. As much as Cyno jokes and flirts with him, they've never really talked about this seriously. Tighnari never let him say any of this because he knew it would dissolve every wall he's put up between them.

He likes Cyno. Really, really likes him. Fuck, he might even love him at this point, who knows? But that's not enough. Even love is not enough. Tighnari has done this before. He knows how it ends. Is it fair, though, to punish Cyno for what happened back then? Maybe it could be different this time.

"I… need some time," Tighnari finally says.

"Okay. Take all the time you need."

Tighnari breathes deeply. "Just give me until the con. I… I'll go. I'll see you there, and then…"

"And then?" Cyno repeats.

"I'll let you know what I decide."

The line is quiet for a moment before Cyno says, "Okay. I can wait."

"Thank you."

"Of course, Nari." He suddenly sounds excited. "Dude, this is gonna be so lit. I wonder if any Genshin VAs will be there."

"Definitely," says Tighnari, the ache in his heart easing. "It's been awhile since I went to a con. I usually cosplay."

"Ooh. Do you have pictures?"

"Fuck off."

"Nari, come on," he pleads. "Show me."

"You'll get to see it in person."

Cyno huffs. "Yeah. Shit." He lets out a little laugh. "I can't believe this is actually happening."

Tighnari giggles back. "Don't get too excited. I said I'd hug you, but that's all you're getting."

"Oh, no it's not," Cyno says in a deep rumble. "'Cause once you get a taste you're gonna want more."

"Doubt it."

"You also doubted I'd be hot, might I remind you."

"So what if you're hot? It's not like I'd ever kiss you."

Cyno lets out a surprised noise. "Wait, did you just admit I'm hot?"

"No."

"You did."

"I didn't."

"Oh, Nari," he chuckles darkly. "Just you wait until I get my hands on you."

Tighnari feels a little thrill race through him. He breathes carefully, forcing himself not to get too excited. "I'm still not letting you touch

my ears. Or my tail."

"What?" Cyno exclaims. He clicks his tongue and says, "Come on."

"Nope," Tighnari insists. "Don't you dare try anything. I'll kick you right in the balls."

"I'll hold you so tight you can't reach."

"Then I'll fucking bite you."

Cyno lets out a groan and says, "Where?"

Tighnari shakes himself. "Calm down, fuckboy. Don't get yourself all worked up."

"I can't help it," Cyno breathes.

"Okay, well, have fun with that. Bye." He quickly hangs up the call.

He cackles at the string of messages Cyno sends him. Tighnari feels light, for once. He knows he has a big decision to make. And he will. He gave himself a deadline, and he'll have to stick to it.

Two months. In two months he'll meet Cyno, and then… well, who knows what the future holds?

***

Scara accepts the call as soon as it pops up. He may or may not have been staring at the screen waiting for it. "Hey, honey."

"Hey, Scara."

"How'd it go?"

Sethos sighs over the call. "You don't have to ask me that every time."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to talk about it."

"I don't," he says tersely.

"Okay. Are you gonna log in?"

"I'm literally doing it right now," he snaps.

"Okay," Scara says again.

Internally, he sighs. Sethos is still angry with him. They haven't had a naughty call since he started going to therapy. Scara misses it. Misses him. He knows he did the right thing. He just has to remind himself of that. Even if Sethos hates him for it, it had to be done.

"I'm sorry," Sethos says softly. "It was… a difficult session."

"That happens sometimes."

He huffs. "Yeah."

Scara shifts in his chair. "Want me to help you feel better?"

Sethos is quiet for a long moment. Scara bites his lip. He shouldn't have asked. It's just that Sethos was really starting to get good at it. And now that Scara has a vague plan to get out of sex work, it's been really hard to lie to himself about how awful it is.

Scara's not a prude. Not at all. He does feel some shame over his job, and it's not something he just casually tells people, but he doesn't think there's anything really wrong with it, in theory. Hell, it's gotten him through some tough years. It's way better money than Scara could make at a day job, and it's really not that hard once you know what to do. He's got a few scripts, and he's pretty good at improvising. It's a way for him to express his sexuality from the safety of his home with all the anonymity of the internet. It's even fun on occasion.

It's just… kind of soul-sucking, honestly. To constantly have to perform for someone else. To fake the way he's feeling. He's usually lying about how much he enjoys it. Sometimes he does, but most of the time it's an act.

His recent dissatisfaction is also kind of Sethos' fault. Once Scara knew what it was like to do that with someone he actually *likes,* he realized how different it was. He realized that it's not just the sex he craves, it's the connection. That's what's missing with his clients. Some of them Scara has been working with for years, but they still treat him like a whore. That's all he is to them.

He felt like he was more to Sethos, but maybe that was just in his head.

"Scara," Sethos says quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Do you…" It takes him a moment to get out the words. "Do you like me?"

Scara's pulse picks up. Fuck. What is he supposed to say to that? "Of course I like you."

"No, I don't mean…" He grunts in frustration. "Do you like *me?* Not getting off with me. Not playing Genshin with me. Do you actually just… like me, with no conditions?"

"Sethos-" He stops himself. He can't just admit that.

"I need an answer, Scara."

He purses his lips. "Yeah, I like you," he says quietly. "I think about you a lot. I want you to be safe and happy. I want to make you smile."

Sethos doesn't say anything. Scara panics.

"I know it's silly when we've never met, and you don't even know what I look like. If you did, you definitely wouldn't want to be with me."

"Don't say that."

"It's true," he insists. "I- I can't let you see me. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Sethos says softly. "I'll like you no matter what you look like."

Scara's heart twists in pain. "You won't."

"Are you really not coming to the con?"

"I can't."

"What if I wear a blindfold the whole time?"

Scara smiles. "Sethos," he chides.

"I want to meet you. I want to be with you, Scara."

"Really?" Scara whispers. "Even after I made you go to therapy, and now you hate it?"

"You're not *making* me go," Sethos points out. "I'm going because I want things to get better, and I believe you when you say they will because you've been through it. And I trust you."

"Oh." Scara scrolls through their chat to find a picture of him. He brings a hand to his monitor, touching the image of Sethos' face. "There's… something you should know about me, Sethos."

This is it. He has to confess. Sethos thinks he wants to be with Scara, but he's wrong. He doesn't really want that because the truth is that he doesn't know Scara at all.

"What is it?"

"I- I'm not-" He chokes on the words. He can't do it. He can't ruin this. This is the one thing in his life that's ever gone right, and he selfishly wants to hold onto it a little longer. Finally he blurts, "I get guys off for money."

Sethos is quiet for a moment before he says, "What?"

"My job," Scara explains. "Those appointments I have all the time? They're ERP. In Genshin. Guys pay me to talk dirty to them over voice, or sometimes just in the game chat. And I have custom emotes and a nudity mod."

There's no response. The tears spring to Scara's eyes.

"So you see," he continues softly, "you don't want to be with me. Because I'm a whore."

"A…?" Sethos stutters. "N-no, you're not."

"I am," he insists. "That's my job, Sethos. That's how I pay my rent and put food on the table. I sell myself to perverts online."

"Oh. So…" He can hear Sethos breathing shakily. "All those times we…?"

Scara shakes his head. "No, that was different. That was because I wanted to. Because I like you, and I wanted to make you feel good. I don't… I don't expect anything from you."

Sethos says nothing. Scara can't help himself from sniffling over the mic. He reaches his hand up to cover his mouth.

"I'm sorry," he manages to get out. "I'm sorry, Sethos."

"Hey, no, it's okay," Sethos says soothingly. "You have nothing to apologize for."

"I lied to you," Scara says, trying not to sob.

"It's fine. I'm not mad at you."

He swallows thickly, trying to control his breathing.

Sethos goes on, "If you think I'm going to judge you for it, I won't."

"Oh, yeah?" Scara challenges. "What do the Mormons have to say about whores, Sethos?"

"Who gives a fuck what they say?" Sethos asks. "I'm not one of them, Scara. I have my own opinions."

"Okay, so what's your opinion, then? You might as well tell me what you really think."

Sethos takes a breath. "You want to know what I really think? I think you're amazing. I think you're kind and sweet, and you have a good heart. That matters way more to me than what you do for work."

The tears slow. It… can't be. There's no way Sethos would actually accept this about him. Not with his bright, sunny smile and innocent soul. He's lying. He has to be lying.

"Don't be stupid," he says, wiping his eyes. "You don't want to be with a whore."

"Stop calling yourself that," Sethos says firmly. "Your identity isn't tied to your job. Your worth isn't tied to your job."

"I'm fucking worthless either way," he grumbles.

"Scara, hey. Don't say that. God, I wish I was with you right now so I could give you a hug."

Scara cradles his own arms and says, "I wish you were with me, too."

"I'd hug you so tight," says Sethos. "And whisper in your ear that I think you're beautiful and special, and you deserve every good thing in the world."

He lets out a little laugh. "Don't talk sweet to me, Sethos. Talk dirty."

"I will later," he teases back. "I'm sorry for getting snappy with you. My emotions have just been all over the place."

Scara nods and says, "That's what happens when you actually start expressing them."

"I guess."

They're both quiet for a minute. Scara manages to stop crying. There's a little bubble of hope singing in his chest.

And then Sethos asks, "Will you come to the con? Please?"

The bubble pops. "You don't want to see me."

"I do. I really do."

"Sethos, I can't."

"Why not?" he asks.

Scara shakes his head, feeling choked up again. "I don't want you to hate me."

"I could never hate you."

"I'm not going, Sethos. We can never meet."

Sethos takes in a breath. "Never?"

"Never," he repeats. "It'd break my heart to lose you."

"Scaraaa," he says sweetly. "You couldn't lose me if you tried."

"You'll change your mind the second you look at me."

"Why?"

"I can't tell you," Scara insists.

"Okay. That's okay." Scara hears him take a deep breath. "I still want you to be my girlfriend," he says quickly.

Scara balks. "I… Sethos, I told you-"

"I don't care if we can never meet," he says, and Scara's heart soars. "Be my long-distance girlfriend. Unless… I mean, if you don't want to, that's fine-"

"Of course I- but-" Scara whines in his throat. "Sethos, I mean it, I can't ever let you see me."

"I don't need to see you to know how I feel about you."

Scara can't take this. He can't. It's too many emotions in such a short span of time. He bursts into tears again, so overwhelmed by the last few minutes that he doesn't know what else he can do.

"Hey, baby, it's okay. Don't cry."

"I'm sorry," he gasps. "I'm sorry, I have to- I have to go."

"Okay. Okay, that's fine. I understand."

He sounds so dejected. Scara just ends the call and pulls off his headset so he can go lie in bed.

He's a piece of shit for doing this to Sethos. He's fully aware of that. He needs to tell him already, just get it over with. He cries even harder thinking about the way Sethos will reject him immediately. Sethos doesn't even like men. The only reason he thinks he likes Scara is because he's imagining some cute girl instead of a short little internet gremlin. He wouldn't want Scara if he knew the truth. Which is why Scara needs to *tell him,* but…

He can't. Fuck, he can't say it. Not right now. Not while Sethos is just starting therapy, finally. He's in a delicate state. Scara will wait. He'll tell him later. Just let him have this. Let him have it for a little while longer.

After he finally manages to calm down, he pulls out his phone.

Scara: I'm sorry for doing this to you honey. I really am

Sethos: It's okay
Sethos: Can we just… go back to how things used to be? Pretend I never said any of that

Scara: Is that what you want?

Sethos: Yeah
Sethos: Just forget all the complicated stuff, okay? I'm too fucked up right now to handle it anyway

Scara: Okay. We can do that
Scara: You want to start now?

Sethos: Are you in a good headspace for that?

Scara: Not really

Sethos: Then why suggest it?

Scara: I want you to feel better

Sethos: How about you take care of yourself tonight? Run a bath, have some chocolate. Idk just relax and be nice to yourself. That'll make me feel better

Scara: You're going to make me start crying again

Sethos: *sent a gif*

Scara: Aww you're too sweet

Sethos: You deserve it
Sethos: Message me if you need anything, okay? Anytime

Scara: I don't want to bother you

Sethos: You won't. Promise me you'll do it

Scara: Okay
Scara: I think I will run a bath

Sethos: Good. Just relax and let yourself feel what you're feeling, okay?

Scara: When the hell did you get so emotionally intelligent?

Sethos: When you dragged me kicking and screaming to therapy lol
Sethos: You don't like it, blame yourself

Scara: Lol fair
Scara: Have a good night honey

Sethos: You too
Sethos: Actually I have a question

Scara: What is it?

Sethos: Is it okay that I called you baby?

Scara bites his lip as he looks down at his phone. He shouldn't encourage this. Sethos wants to go back to how things were. He's called Scara 'baby' before, but only in a dirty way. Never just casually,

like the way Scara calls him 'honey.' But well… If Scara is using a pet name, shouldn't Sethos get to use one too? That's only fair.

Scara: Yeah it's okay

Sethos: Can I do it again?

Scara: Sure honey. As much as you want

Sethos: Okay
Sethos: Good night baby

Scara smiles down at his phone. *Let me have this,* he chants. *Just let me have this.*

Chapter End Notes

FINALLY Cynonari kinda sorta admitted feelings, not really but almost? We're getting there, you guys. They will all meet eventually, and things are going to happen. But first we have to get through the next... at least like 4-5 chapters of drama. It's going to be great.

But hey, look, Scara finally told the truth! Or part of the truth. Those two are so messy. Sethos is going through it, poor guy. At least he gets smut next chapter. See, I can be nice.

Chapter 13: If You Put Your Mouth On This Cecilia, I Will Reach Through the Screen and Slap You

Chapter Notes

> There's CNC is this chapter. Just thought I should warn you. Wonder who it iiiiisss?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sethos is an idiot. He knows this. He knows this like he knows his hair is brown and his eyes are green. The sun rises in the east and sets in the west, and Sethos is an idiot. That's not him being self-deprecating, it's just a fact.

He's fallen hard for Scara. How could he do anything else when she's so sweet and lovely? He knew it was stupid of him, knew that right from the beginning. It was just… his therapist told him something. She said if he spent his whole life afraid of being rejected then he would never be accepted. Something about that just hit him. That was why he acted like such an idiot. That was why he asked Scara that dumb question. Because he *is* afraid, and he's tired of being afraid.

Even though it was really stupid, he's glad he did it. He learned that rejection isn't the end of the world, even if it does feel pretty shitty. And anyway, they still have their calls. He likes feeling close to her, even though she doesn't want to be with him. It does make his heart ache, but Sethos is getting through it.

"You took a big risk, Sethos," Nahida tells him over their call. "How do you feel about that?"

"I think I needed to do it," he says. "Even though she said no. I thought about what you said about how I didn't technically get rejected back in high school because I never actually asked her for anything. All this time, I've never asked a girl out. I just assumed they would say no, and the ones who asked me were just doing it out of pity. It's like…" He cocks his head, thinking about it. "My whole life, I've just been making assumptions about how other people think about me, when really, that's how I think of myself."

A little smile lifts her lips. "What made you realize that?"

"Well, no one ever actually said those things about me. That I was ugly or unlovable. All that came from me."

"Mm. The lies we tell ourselves are the worst ones, you know."

"They are," he agrees. "Because they're just in my head. They're things I never said out loud. I didn't realize how stupid it all sounded until I started writing it down."

Her eyes sparkle. "So the homework helped?"

"It did, actually. I thought the journal thing was silly, but-" He shrugs a little bashfully.

"It's not silly if it works, is it?"

He huffs and says, "I guess not. I'm sorry I was kind of… dismissive, in the beginning."

"Oh, don't you worry." She waves a hand. "You're not the first, and you won't be the last."

A smile spreads over his face. "Thank you, Nahida," he says, and he means it.

"I'm always happy to help. But you did the work yourself. Don't forget that."

Sethos still has a faint smile on his face when he clicks to call Scara. They have a routine now where he calls her after every appointment. It helps him get through the difficult ones when he knows she's there waiting for him.

"Hey, honey," she says after picking up.

"Hey, baby."

She lets out a little hum. "Good session?"

"Yeah," he replies, leaning back in his chair.

"So you don't need to be consoled?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

He chuckles but doesn't engage with the teasing. He does feel a little awkward knowing Scara does this kind of stuff for work. It definitely came as a shock when she told him, but he really doesn't judge her for it. It does make it… weird, though. She's been acting a little different since that day.

"Baby, can I ask you something?" he starts. "You don't have to answer."

"Hmm." She pauses for a moment. "Alright."

"Is this how it goes with your clients? You just… start the call and get right to it?"

She laughs, but it sounds a little ironic. "Well, they're not paying me for small talk."

"But we're… friends, right? And you know I do want to talk to you still?" She doesn't answer, and Sethos bites his lip. "I like doing this with you. A lot. But you've been kind of different since you told me about your work."

"Have I?" she asks quietly.

"Yeah." Sethos shifts in his seat. This is an uncomfortable conversation, but he's been getting better at those. "You know I still care about you, right? Even if you don't want to be with me."

"Sethos… it's not that I don't want to."

"Really?" he asks her. "Because it's okay if you don't. I can handle it. Things are… tough right now, but I don't want you to think I'm going to break down over it. I respect your decision." He laughs suddenly. "I'm not going to Cyno you into it."

She laughs back. "No, that's not really your style." Her voice softens. "Are you really okay, Sethos?"

"Mm, not really," Sethos admits. "Not yet. But I think I will be."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"So you're not mad at me?"

He clicks his tongue. "No, baby. And I don't expect you to get me off every time we call. I still want to talk to you about random stuff and

play Genshin and just… be your friend. I'm not like your clients, okay? I'm never going to treat you like you're disposable 'cause you're not. You're important to me."

He can hear her breathing shakily. "You're too good to me, Sethos," she says softly.

"You deserve it." She scoffs, and he insists, "You do. You have such a gentle heart, and you're always patient with me. I really appreciate it. And… I think all this therapy stuff is really helping. And I just can't stop thinking about how I never would've gotten here without you, and I'm so grateful."

She sniffles. He feels a little bad for making her cry. "Sethos," she whispers.

"Have you thought about going back, by the way? Some of that stuff you said about being worthless kind of worried me."

She sniffles quietly again, then clears her throat. "I don't have insurance anymore. I'm technically self-employed, so it would be expensive to get on a plan."

"I can help you pay for it," he offers.

"Sethos!" she exclaims. "No, I can't let you do that."

"I just want to help you. Like you helped me."

"No, I-" She sighs. "Honey, you're too sweet."

"You make me want to be sweet. Anything I can do to take care of you, I will. I want you to be happy, Scara. I'd do anything for you."

She's quiet for a moment. "I'm planning on going back to school."

Sethos makes a noise of surprise. "Are you?"

"Yeah," she says softly. "For graphic design. I want to get out of sex work. It's really not… I mean, it's not bad or anything, it's just not what I want for myself."

"That's great, baby. You can definitely do it."

"I'm going to try. I just… I want things to get better."

He nods. "They will. Just got to put in the effort."

"Yeah." She hums happily. "Well, now that you made me cry-"

Sethos laughs and says, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You can make me cry anytime."

"Yeah?" He bites his lip. "That what you want, baby?"

She makes a delighted little, "Oooh. You read that book, didn't you?"

"I did," he confirms. "It gave me some ideas."

"Mm. Like what?"

"Well," he starts. "I know… I mean, from the beginning you've been asking me to treat you rough."

"Mhmm."

"I just want to clarify that I would never, ever do this without your consent."

"Honey, you have my consent," she purrs.

"Do I?"

She moans softly and says, "Anytime, anyplace. I'm yours."

He feels a little thrill race through him at those words. "Yeah? How about this? We're out at a club. I see you dancing and decide I have to have you. The bass is pounding in our ears. You've given yourself over to the music completely, and the way you dance is sensual and captivating. Everyone is looking at you, but I'm the one that's gonna fuck you tonight."

"Sethos," she sighs.

He unbuttons his pants, slipping his hand beneath them. He stokes himself gently, just getting warmed up. "I make my way over to you. I take you by the hips and grind against your ass. You try to push me off, but I just hold you tighter. You manage to look back at me, and the minute our eyes connect, you stop resisting."

"You have such pretty eyes," she murmurs.

"I just stare at you like I know you're the most beautiful thing I'll ever see," he goes on. "I take your hands and put them behind my neck,

and you hold on to me. The song's blasting from the speakers. It's your favorite song, and you know in this moment that we were meant to meet. You're not usually this kind of girl, but you want me. You push your body against mine. You feel so good, I bare my teeth and growl."

Scara giggles throatily. "Sethos, you're an animal."

"I'm going to fuck you like an animal," he replies.

"Please," she gasps.

"I lean forward and whisper into your ear. You nod and make your way to the bathroom. It's empty. You wait there for me, biting your bottom lip to keep from touching yourself. You're so turned on, your panties are soaked. You lean against the wall and hum, thinking about what I'll feel like inside you."

"I need you to fill me up, Sethos," Scara moans. "I'm so empty without you."

"I've got you, baby. I push the door open and slip inside, locking it behind me."

"Leave it unlocked," she interrupts.

Sethos hisses through his teeth. He strokes himself more firmly, bringing himself to full hardness. "I flip the lock back open. Anyone could walk in on us here, you half-naked as I fuck you against the sink."

"Yes, Sethos. *Ah."*

"There's a tense moment of anticipation, and then I'm crossing the room in a flash. I grab you and flip you over, slamming you into the sink. You're forced to hold onto it to keep yourself upright. I pull my cock out and push your panties aside. I slide inside you. You're too tight to fit me, but I don't care. I force you to take it anyway, all of it, all at once."

Scara whimpers over the call. Sethos strokes himself fast, letting out a little grunt.

"You feel so good, baby. So tight and wet for me. This is what you need, huh? You need your pussy pounded?"

"Yes, please. Sethos, *Sethos-"*

He can tell she's close by the high-pitched sounds over the call. "I fuck you hard. Harder and better than you've ever been fucked. I grab your hair and shove your face against the mirror. Your lipstick smears over the glass. You start to cry. It hurts, but it feels so good."

"Sethos," she gasps. "God, baby, fuck me."

"Your tears turn me on. My hips slam against your ass as I thrust inside you. It's too much for you. You start begging me to stop, but I don't. I just fuck you harder."

"Sethos, oh my God," she says desperately, panting into her mic.

"You reach back, trying to scratch me with your nails. I keep going. I push my hand against your lower back so you can't get away from me, no matter how much you struggle. I can feel your walls tighten around me. I'm gonna make you come even though you don't want to. You'll come for me anyway."

"Fuck, fuck, yes-" Her moans reach a breaking point, and Sethos hears the moment she spills over. He knows the sound well by now.

"I keep fucking you as you sob." He strokes hard and fast, chasing the pleasure she always gives him. "You go limp beneath me, accepting your fate."

"Come inside me, Sethos."

And that's all it takes. He comes the second she says it, spilling out with a loud cry. It's a powerful one, his whole body tensing beneath his hand. His toes curl as he leans back in his chair and moans. She likes hearing him. He likes hearing her, too. Damn, he really does like her a lot.

They both pant for a moment before Scara whines and says, "Honey, that was so good."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Oh my God, yes. Swear on my life I've never come that hard."

He huffs out a breathless laugh. "Really? You're not just saying that?"

"No." She laughs back. "I was not expecting that."

"That's… the kind of stuff you like, though, right? I didn't go too far?"

"No, it was amazing." She whimpers again. "God, what have I done to you and your poor, innocent virgin soul?"

He chuckles, reaches for a tissue to wipe himself up. "Not so innocent anymore, huh?"

"Oh, not at all," she moans.

Sethos smiles as he cleans up. Scara is quiet as she does the same, presumably. He suddenly wonders what she tastes like, and he squeezes his eyes shut. *We can never meet.* He has to accept that. Has to, because he refuses to lose her.

They log onto Genshin and play together for awhile. The whole time Sethos hears her voice in his head, *We can never meet, we can never meet.*

***

It's Kaveh's wedding day.

Okay, not *really.* It's a virtual wedding. And he's still kind of pissed at Alhaitham for fake-proposing to him. That shit really freaked him out.

It's not that Kaveh doesn't love Alhaitham. He does love him, a lot. But marriage? No, it would've been way too soon. It was the first time they ever met! And yeah, sure, they've been together for several months now. *Months,* though. Not years. It would be insane to marry someone after just a few months of dating. Even though…

Well, Aspen really put things into perspective for Kaveh. He likes California—he has a lot of friends here, the weather's great, plus Disneyland! Who doesn't love Disneyland? Kaveh has never been to the east coast, but he's heard it sucks. Admittedly, those opinions may be biased coming from Californians. The real question is, is he willing to move across the country for Alhaitham? Honestly, even though it sounds crazy, he kind of wants to.

He wants to be with Alhaitham all the time. Not through calls and messages but in person. He wants to snuggle and kiss him and have hot monkey sex! Everyone wants that, right? And Kaveh could totally have that with Alhaitham. Their chemistry's amazing, they make each other laugh, and he was romantic as fuck for that entire trip. How could Kaveh not want that? God, he wants it bad.

Coming back to California alone was fucking depressing. He needs

someone beside him. This long-distance thing is not enough. He's just not sure where Alhaitham's head is with all that, and he doesn't want to be the one to bring it up. So he doesn't. They just… plan a wedding together.

They end up scheduling it on raid night, since that's when everybody is free. Tighnari volunteers to help him decorate his house again—which is kind of surprising, given how much he complained while they were doing it for the Christmas gala.

"You know what?" Kaveh muses as he tabs through his house inventory looking for a good plant to go in this corner. "I think complaining is your way of showing affection."

Tighnari snorts. "What?"

"It totally is. Because you complain about Cyno all the time, and you're obviously in love with him."

"Shut up, ho."

"You're a ho. For Cyno."

"I will never, ever sleep with Cyno."

Kaveh makes a doubtful noise. "Yeah? That's not what you're planning to do at the con?"

"Definitely not."

"You said you were going to bite him."

Tighnari sighs and says, "You've seen him. He's very biteable."

"Mm, yes," Kaveh agrees. "Why are you still pretending you don't like him?"

"To protect my dignity."

"But you have no dignity."

"Ssh," Tighnari hisses. "What are you trying to put in that corner?"

"A plant. I think I'll use this one." He places it.

"You can't put a cecilia indoors," Tighnari protests. "They only grow where harsh winds blow."

"But it's an indoor furnishing," Kaveh points out. "It's in this nice pot, see?"

"Okay, but lore-wise, they wouldn't grow indoors."

"What if I blow on it?"

"No."

"What if I blow *really* hard?" Kaveh says in a suggestive tone. "I've been told it's one of my special talents."

"Kaveh, if you put your mouth on this cecilia, I will reach through the screen and slap you."

Kaveh smirks. "Mm, I'm okay with that."

"Stop flirting with me. Don't you have a boyfriend?"

"He knows what I'm like," Kaveh protests.

"Yeah? You think he'd be okay with it?"

Kaveh frowns. Alhaitham is kind of possessive. He's never really thought about it before. "It was just a joke," he says defensively.

"A flirty joke," Tighnari says.

"I wasn't flirting with you!"

"Ooo-kay." He quickly changes the subject. "Put a Sumeru rose there."

"Hmm," Kaveh hums, tabbing through all his slots again. "I don't think I have one."

"I do. Come here."

Kaveh goes over to him, and Tighnari starts a trade. He hands over the item.

"Thank you," says Kaveh, going to place it in the corner. "You know, underneath all the snark, you're actually kind of sweet."

Tighnari snorts and says, "I'm not sweet."

"You are," Kaveh coos. "I know you like helping me decorate. You can bitch and moan all you want, but you wouldn't still be here if you

hated it. Or me."

Tighnari sighs. "I'm really not as much of an asshole in person. I just get really intense about the game."

"Yeah, but you have fun, too," says Kaveh. "I know snapping at everyone is just your way of protecting your soft, gay heart." He steps back to admire the plant. It does look nice there. He goes on, "You care about people. You always check up on me. You remember little details about everyone. You *are* sweet. You just feel like you have to hide it for some reason."

"Shut *up,* ho," Tighnari says again, but it only makes Kaveh smile.

"Is that Tighnari-speak for 'I love you, friend'? 'Cause if it is, then I love you, too."

Tighnari scoffs. "Gay."

"Yep!" Kaveh runs up to him again. "Come here." He plays the hug emote.

"Ew, get off me!" Tighnari says, running away. "I do not consent to this!"

"Get back here and let me hug you, bitch!" Kaveh screeches, chasing after him.

Kaveh follows a protesting Tighnari around the house for a while before they get back to decorating. They chat while they work, about the game and about life. Kaveh keeps ribbing him about Cyno. Honestly, he doesn't understand why those two aren't together yet. Tighnari probably has his reasons, but certainly no guy has ever chased Kaveh that hard. Then again, Kaveh pretty much gives it up the moment he knows someone is interested, so.

Alhaitham joins the chat, and Tighnari instantly screams, "No, get out! You can't see the bride before the wedding!"

"I'm not seeing him," Alhaitham points out.

"It's still bad luck!" Tighnari insists.

"It's a virtual wedding," says Alhaitham. "Calm down. How's it going?"

"We're almost done," Kaveh tells him. "Just some finishing touches. You get everything sorted with your outfit?"

"Yep."

Kaveh's eyes narrow. "You're not wearing the top hat, are you?"

"Baaabe-"

"No!" Kaveh says instantly. "I will not marry you if you are wearing that hat!"

"Really? The hat is more important to you than our love?"

"I will leave you at the fucking altar, so help me God."

"Bride gets final say on the outfits," Tighnari insists. "Those are the rules."

Alhaitham scoffs. "Technically we're both grooms."

"Okay, sure, but we all know which one of you is the bottom."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" Kaveh asks him. "Because I love taking cock. You can't shame me for something I'm not ashamed of."

"Hey, I take it too, but I don't feel the need to scream it with every fiber of my being," says Tighnari.

Kaveh scoffs. "Oh, please. You're the bottomest bottom who ever bottomed. You're desperate for Cyno's cock."

"I will have you know I have never thought about Cyno's cock a single time."

"Fucking *li-ar,"* Kaveh singsongs.

"Are you really not going to marry me over a stupid hat?" Alhaitham asks.

"I will die on this hill," Kaveh insists viciously.

"How about this? I'll take it off… if you take it off later."

Kaveh smirks. "You know I'll take it off for you anytime, babe."

"Wait until your wedding night, you horny bitches!" Tighnari calls out. "We've got two more hours to make my dear Kaveh the most beautiful bride anyone has ever seen, so stop fucking around. Groom, *out* of the chat."

"What are you, the maid of honor?" Alhaitham asks.

"Obviously," Tighnari snaps. "Shoo! We must prepare the bride. Where the hell is my other bridesmaid?"

Kaveh scrunches his brow. "Who, Scara?"

"Yes! How am I supposed to get you ready by myself?"

Kaveh laughs and says, "Okay, I'll message her."

A few minutes later Scara joins the voice channel, and she takes the whole thing as seriously as Tighnari. They gossip and laugh as Kaveh gets ready for the wedding. They both tell him how gorgeous he is, and Kaveh preens under the attention. His heart feels so full today. Surrounded by his friends, getting (virtually) married to the man he loves. It's like a dream come true.

Alhaitham shows up sans top hat and begins the wedding cutscene. It takes place at the church in Mondstadt. It's a beautiful ceremony. Kaveh decided to go with the wedding dress option, and it's beautiful. It does look a little silly on his buff character, but Kaveh doesn't mind. It makes him feel like a fucking princess.

They exchange rings. They're actual, wearable items in the game. There's also a two-seater mount that they fly away on at the end of the cutscene, with everyone throwing rose petals at them. Cyno's character is singing, and Scara's is crying. The scene ends, and Kaveh squeals.

"Okay, reception time!" he declares. "Everyone teleport to my house. You're about to be amazed."

When they get there, everyone compliments him on the decorations. Kaveh makes them sit down at the table for dinner.

"Excuse me, lady and gentlemen," Cyno says, clearing his throat and standing up. "As the best man, I am obligated to give a speech."

"Who said you're the best man?" Alhaitham asks him. "Maybe Sethos is my best man."

"Well, Sethos didn't prepare an epic speech," Cyno points out. "Did you?"

"I did not," Sethos confirms.

Tighnari sighs. "I swear to God, if you start quoting a war movie…"

"Hey, excuse you! This is an honest speech straight from the heart." He clears his throat. "Alhaitham. My man. My bro. Your guild invite came at the perfect time. I was in a dark place. I was raiding, but my heart wasn't in it. I wasn't doing it for the right reasons. You came and showed me the light. Now you're all my best friends, and I would descend into hell itself for any one of you.

"From the beginning, it was obvious how much you loved Kaveh. The banter, the teasing. Y'all are cute and gay as fuck." Everyone laughs. "Now, you've had your arguments. Who hasn't? We all remember that time you got him killed by dropping that laser AOE on him."

"That was not my fault," Alhaitham says. "He was out of position."

"You did it on purpose!" Kaveh shouts.

"Yeah, so?"

"Alright, alright, settle down," says Cyno. "Point is, there have been ups and downs, but you've always seen each other through. Your love is the kind of love that gives a guy hope. If you two can find each other and fall in love, then maybe all of us can. We'll just have to see." He clicks his tongue, and everyone knows who he's talking about.

"In conclusion, I just want to say-"

"Here he goes," Tighnari mutters.

"'All right, sweethearts, you're a team and there's nothin' to worry about. We come here, and we gonna conquer, and we gonna kick some, is that understood?'"

"Understood!" Sethos says immediately. The rest of them follow, chiming in with a rousing chorus.

"Oorah!" Cyno shouts. Half of them say it back, and half of them laugh.

"Thank you, Cyno," says Alhaitham as he sits back down.

"God bless your union, marines."

"Dork," says Tighnari.

"Aww, thank you, Nari," Cyno replies.

They head to the dance floor after dinner, where everyone has a great time. Alhaitham and Kaveh's song is the Sumeru battle music, and they have a dance off to it. Everyone agrees that Alhaitham wins, which Kaveh gets very dramatic about. He forgets easily, though, letting himself get caught up in the celebration. It's a happy night.

"I'm so glad I have you idiots as friends!" he declares over drinks in the parlor. "To the Crewmeru!"

"Crewmeru!" everyone cheers.

Kaveh laughs. He really does love them. He's really excited to get to meet them all. Scara says she won't be there, but Kaveh hasn't given up on convincing her yet.

They'll all be together soon. Kaveh can't wait.

Chapter End Notes

> This is the point where I decided to take a complete left turn with the Sethoscara. The fic is chaos, you all know this. Don't worry, it gets even kinkier.
>
> Next chapter is the big one. Not the con, not yet, but the thing that had to happen before the con. I'm being vague on purpose cause some of you already guessed. It'll be out in two days and I can't wait for you to read it! AHHHH!

Chapter 14: I Don't Need You to Defend My Honor, I Need You to Hold Me

Chapter Notes

This is it, you guys. Get ready for DRAMAAA!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cyno has been practically vibrating with excitement ever since Tighnari said he'd come to the con. He knows, he just *knows* that when they meet in person Tighnari won't be able to resist him. He can protest all he wants, but Cyno is going to throw him over his shoulder and have his filthy way with him regardless. He's told Tighnari this multiple times, and Tighnari just laughs and repeats that he'll bite. It drives Cyno crazy just thinking about it. He keeps having to remind himself to calm down.

They're in between patches in Genshin right now, so raid night has become a time for them to hang out and do random shit. They've done some mount farming for Kaveh, glam farming for Alhaitham and Scara, and achievement farming for Sethos. Whenever it's Tighnari's turn to pick something he makes them play hide and seek, and whenever it's Cyno's turn he lets Tighnari pick. So yeah, they play a lot of hide and seek.

Tonight Scara picked naked raids. Right now all of them are trying to fight a dragon without any gear or weapons, and it's not going very well. Turns out punching dragons is not very effective. They're having fun, though, which is what really matters.

"Are you guys free tomorrow night?" Tighnari asks the group. "One of my old guilds does dance parties."

"Ooh, I'm there," Cyno says instantly.

Everyone else agrees except for Scara. "I have an appointment," she says.

"What kind of appointment?" Tighnari shoots back.

"None of your business," she sing-songs.

"Oh, come on," Tighnari wheedles her. "Why so secretive?"

"Leave her alone, man," says Sethos.

"I bet it's something naughty," he goes on. "But not with Sethos. Are you cheating on him? Ooh, or are you cheating *with* him? Like, you already have a boyfriend and you're just whoring yourself out on the side?"

"Hey, Nari, cut it out," Cyno interjects. "If she wants to keep it private, that's up to her."

"Oh, you're no fun," Tighnari complains. "Aren't you guys curious?"

"I am!" Kaveh exclaims. "Tell us, girl. Give us the tea."

Cyno's heart sinks. He knows Scara is sensitive about her work. It's really none of their fucking business.

"Okay guys, seriously, back off," Sethos says sharply.

"Well, if she's not gonna post her titties, she can at least tell us about her mysterious appointments," Kaveh reasons.

"They're for ERP," Scara says suddenly. "I am whoring myself out, because that's what whores do. I am literally a whore, as in, that is my profession. Okay? Are you happy now?"

"Wait, *what?"* Kaveh screams. "Seriously? Oooooh."

"How much do you charge?" Alhaitham asks.

Kaveh yelps into the mic. "Alhaitham!" he chides.

"I just want to know what she charges."

"Why?" Kaveh demands. "Why would you need to know that?"

"I'm not saying I would pay her," he defends, and then, "Wait, is Sethos paying you?"

"Shut the fuck up, all of you!" Sethos shouts. "It's just a job, okay? It doesn't mean you can be fucking assholes about it."

"Hang on," says Kaveh. "You already knew?"

"Hold up," Tighnari interjects. "Did you ever have a client named Shadow Reign?"

"Uh… Yeah, a while ago. Friend of yours?"

"You fucking *cunt,"* Tighnari grits out.

Everyone starts talking at once. Cyno puts together the pieces immediately. Tighnari's never mentioned his ex's character name, but Cyno knows what that bastard did—cheated on him with a catgirl. A catgirl who does ERP. Fuck, how did he not make that connection? No. There's got to be millions of catgirls out there, and probably a bunch of them do ERP. There's no way Scara is the one Tighnari caught his ex with.

Cyno tries to calm them all down, but it's impossible over Tighnari's screaming. He's ranting viciously at Scara while Sethos screams at him to stop, and everyone else is just trying to figure out what the fuck is going on.

"Nari, it's not her!" Cyno tries.

"Of fucking course it's her!" Tighnari insists. "You changed your name, didn't you? And your appearance? With items from the shop."

"What does it matter?" Sethos yells at him. "That's no reason to start screaming at her, you dick!"

"Wait, you're the one that caught us?" Scara laughs into her mic. "Oh shit, I remember that."

"SEE?" Tighnari screams. "It was her! You knew the whole fucking time, didn't you?"

"Maybe I did," says Scara. "That make you mad, huh?"

"You stupid fucking whore!"

"She is not a whore!" Sethos shouts.

"I am, actually," Scara replies.

Tighnari leaves the voice chat. Cyno follows him out immediately and tries to call him. He doesn't pick up. Cyno rings three times and sends several messages. Tighnari doesn't answer any of them. *Fuck.*

He sighs and rejoins the server chat, which has gotten a little calmer, but not by much.

"Look, I'm sorry-" Kaveh is saying.

"You bullied her into sharing something she didn't want to share," Sethos says heatedly.

"It's fine, Sethos," Scara says in an airy tone. "I don't give a shit if they know."

"He was calling you names!"

"Well," says Scara, "I'm sure it's not the first time I've helped someone cheat." She lets out a short bark of laughter. "It's kind of hilarious, actually. Small world."

"Why are you acting like this, Scara?" Cyno cuts in. "Huh? You didn't have to be a bitch about it."

"I *am* a bitch," Scara says sassily.

"No, you're not," says Cyno. "You're just hurt."

"Ha! I'm not *hurt*. Nothing can hurt me."

"Sethos, can you talk some sense into her, please?" he asks his cousin.

"No," says Sethos. "Tighnari was being fucking rude, and he deserved it."

Cyno's tone darkens. "He did *not* deserve getting cheated on. Both of you leave this chat and calm down before you say something you regret."

"Ooh, fun police," Scara mocks him. "Guess we're done with the raid, huh? Whatever. Talk to you boys later. Or not." She leaves, and Sethos follows her.

Cyno lets out a terse sigh. Tighnari's gone offline. Cyno hates thinking he's going through this alone, but if Tighnari won't pick up, there's nothing he can do about it. "Well, that was a fucking mess," he says.

"Am I the only one who's totally lost?" Kaveh asks.

"Yeah, what the hell just happened?" Alhaitham follows up.

"Tighnari was engaged a few years ago," Cyno explains. "To a guy who cheated on him with Genshin ERP. He literally caught them on the call. And if Scara says she remembers it, then- Yeah, I guess it was her. Unless she just said that to be a bitch, I don't know."

"Oh, shiiit," Kaveh breathes. "Okay, so I understand the screaming."

"He shouldn't have yelled at her," says Cyno. "Fuck, I don't know what's going on with her lately."

"Did you know about the ERP?" Alhaitham asks.

Cyno sighs and says, "Yeah."

"And you knew about Tighnari's fiance?"

"Yes," he says shortly. "But come on, what are the fucking odds? There's no way. She just said it to mess with him."

Kaveh hums doubtfully. "I don't know, hun. She recognized the username."

"There's no way," Cyno repeats.

"I mean, it is a pretty shitty thing to do," Kaveh agrees. "But I doubt she knew the guy was engaged when it started. She doesn't seem like the kind of girl who would do that."

"Nah, she's not," says Cyno. "She's a sweetheart. Fuck, she's gotta be going through it too right now."

"Nari not answering you?" Alhaitham asks.

"No," Cyno replies. He suddenly gets a notification and says, "Fuck, that's him."

He leaves the chat instantly to pick up the call with Tighnari. "I can't believe that bitch," Tighnari says.

"Hey, Nari, I know," Cyno soothes him. "It's okay."

"It's not okay." He's definitely crying. Cyno's heart breaks for him. "It was her, Cyno. She ruined my life!"

"Your ex ruined your life," Cyno corrects. "She probably didn't even know."

"Wait, you're taking *her* side?"

"No, I'm not taking her side," Cyno says quickly. "She could've been lying, anyway. She's real fucked up right now for a lot of reasons."

"You *are* taking her side!" Tighnari wails. "How could you?"

"Nari, hey, I'm always on your side. Okay? Always. I know it hurts. I know you're pissed. That's fine, be pissed. Just don't let her hear you. Say it to me, okay? You can vent all of it out to me. Go ahead, I won't stop you."

Tighnari gulps, then breaks into sobs. "That stupid fucking whore."

"I know," Cyno tells him.

"Fucking cheating *bastard."*

"Yeah, he was a bastard."

"She fucked my fiance!"

"I mean… kinda, yeah."

"She did!" Tighnari insists. "I don't care if it was virtual! It's still cheating."

"It is still cheating," Cyno agrees.

Tighnari screams over the line. It hurts to hear him going through this. But Cyno keeps listening patiently, letting him rant about what a dick his ex was and how it's all so unfair. He's used to Tighnari's rants, but this is different. He's reliving the worst moment of his life and finding out his friend was involved in it. Cyno feels for that. He does.

At the same time he knows he can't blame Scara, if it really was her. He knows her job is tough on her, and he wants to support her through this, too. She has Sethos, though. Hopefully his cousin can handle that. He's been talking a lot smarter since the therapy. Cyno really hopes she's okay, too.

He stays on with Nari all night. They're both lying down in bed when Tighnari says quietly, "Cyno?"

"Yeah, Nari?"

"Thanks. For being here. It's always hard to think about that day. I've never really moved on from it, you know?"

"I know. But you still can. I know it hurts to open that wound. You never let it heal, did you?"

"No," he admits. "I poke at it all the fucking time. I just don't understand why I wasn't enough for him. He said he loved me, Cyno, and the whole time he was shelling out for ERP. With Scara! That *bitch."*

"Nari, you know she's not a bitch," Cyno says gently.

Tighnari huffs and says sullenly, "I know. She was acting like one, though. Fucking laughing about it. What's wrong with her?"

"She's got a lot going on right now," Cyno tells him. "You know she's trying to quit?"

"Quit what? ERP?" Tighnari asks.

"Yeah. She doesn't want to do it anymore. It's, ah… It's affected her a lot."

"So you knew about it?"

"Yeah, I knew. But I never thought- I mean, it's a crazy coincidence."

Tighnari is quiet for a moment. "You think she was lying?"

"I'm not sure," Cyno admits. "We can figure out the whole thing later. Just don't go too hard on her, okay? She's a good girl, and Sethos really loves her."

Tighnari hums and says, "Does he?"

"Yes. Not sure he knows that yet, but definitely yes."

"Hmm." A few breaths pass before Tighnari says quietly, "Cyno?"

"What is it?"

"Do you love me?"

Cyno swallows the lump in his throat. "I don't know what answer you want me to give you, Nari."

"Neither do I," Tighnari whispers. "I'm terrified of this. Us."

Cyno smiles, his heart warming a little through the sadness. "Is there an us?"

He holds his breath as he waits for Tighnari's answer. "I think there

could be," he says at last.

It feels like he's walking on air for a second. Tonight's drama is still hanging over them both, but there's a glimmer of hope there. Cyno has faith everything will work out. He's always been an optimist. Maybe because he knows whatever happens, he'll be able to get through it.

Cyno's a resilient guy. How else would he have put up with Tighnari messing him around for this long? The way Cyno sees it, whatever's meant to happen will happen. Even if this thing with Tighnari doesn't work out—and it's like a sucker punch just thinking about it—Cyno will be alright. Other people are more sensitive, though. The way Cyno sees it, it's his job to protect those people. That's why he looks after Collei. That's why he volunteers in his community. Cyno knows other people have it worse, and he wants to help wherever he can.

He wants to help Tighnari. And maybe there is a way to help him get past this. Patch things up with Scara and finally move on from what happened with his ex. Maybe then… maybe then he'll finally be ready.

Cyno whispers goodnight and hopes with all his heart.

***

It doesn't really hit Scara what happened until he sees his hands shaking in front of his face. He ruined everything. He ruined it all, and for what?

He was just in a fucking mood after that last client. Their appointment was right before the raid. He has less and less patience for their shit the longer he drags this out. He doesn't know when exactly he's going to quit—he'll have to keep going at least until he can get another job—but it feels like it can't come soon enough. Still, that's no excuse to just set off a nuke in the voice chat. Of course, he had no idea that Tighnari had dated one of his clients. How could he have known? It's insane to even think about.

He does remember that call with Shadow Reign. Guy was a real pig, but he paid well. Scara was already thinking about dropping him anyway because he'd gotten pretty demanding, and then one of their calls was interrupted by someone screaming, "What the fuck?" and that was all he heard before the guy disconnected. Scara was never totally sure what happened there, but he figured it had been a partner. And that made him feel like shit.

Scara honestly has no way of knowing if any of his clients are using him to cheat, and that was the first time he was ever confronted with something like that. He dropped the client immediately because even if there was some other explanation, he felt sick just thinking about it. The whole point of doing this is so people can use him, but… no one had ever used him like *that.* He thought about stopping for a while. But it really felt like there was nothing else he could do. He has plans now, but it was different back then. It all felt kind of hopeless.

Maybe Sethos had a point when he suggested Scara go back to therapy. This whole thing really has affected him a lot more than he thought. He might be able to tell a therapist about it now that he knows it won't be forever. That the end is in sight. As much as he'll defend this job for everything it's given him, it really has warped his self-perception. He didn't even realize how bad it's gotten until now.

Sethos is in the middle of ranting about Tighnari when Scara starts crying. Sethos instantly cools off. "Hey, baby, it's okay," he says soothingly.

"It's not," Scara sobs. "They all hate me."

"No, they don't. Look, whatever happened, Tighnari was out of line-"

"He wasn't," Scara interrupts. "That guy, my client, it must've been his boyfriend. He caught us on call. Think of how fucking horrible that must've been for him."

"That's no excuse-"

"Sethos, *stop!"* Scara wails. "I don't need you to defend my honor, I need you to hold me."

"Okay. Okay, I'm holding you. Just let it out."

Scara wraps his arms around himself and cries. "I don't want to do this anymore," he says eventually.

"Well, you don't have to."

"I do! It's my *job."*

"But you can quit," Sethos says. "Get a different job."

Scara lets out a sob. "I'm trying! But I can't just stop without something else lined up."

"I'll take care of you, baby. Don't you worry about a thing."

"I don't want to lose my apartment. I don't want to be homeless again." His breath quickens just thinking about it. Those were the worst fucking years of his life.

"You won't," Sethos says firmly. "I will never let that happen to you again."

Scara huffs, distraught. "I'm not taking money from you. That'll be just like selling myself."

"No, no it won't," he insists. "Scara, I- I don't know if I should tell you this."

His heart pounds. It feels like it's crawling up his throat, and he has to swallow around it. "Tell me what?"

It takes him a moment to answer. "I just… I care, you know? I care about you a lot. And I know there's stuff you don't want to tell me, and you don't have to. But please, *please,* you have to let me help you. You're not happy with this job. It's tearing you apart, and I can't let you do it anymore. I will take care of you, okay? That's all I want to do. I just want to make sure you're safe."

Scara closes his eyes, breathing in shakily.

"This ends today. You understand?"

He gulps. "Yeah."

"Good. No more."

"No more," Scara repeats with a little shiver.

"Right. I, um… Sorry, I don't mean to order you or anything-"

"Please do," Scara whispers. "Tell me I'm not allowed."

"Oh. Uh. Okay?" he says awkwardly. "You're not allowed. You're not allowed to get anyone off except for me. Because… you're mine."

Scara whimpers. "Okay."

Sethos pauses for a moment. "Scara, are we doing a bit?"

He shakes his head and says, "No. I'm yours."

"Oh… kay?" he says, clearly confused. "Um. What does that mean?"

"Don't question it. I'm just… I'm doing what you say now. Okay?"

"Okay. Yeah, okay. Whatever you need, baby."

Scara lets out another little whine. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. So… will you let me send you money?"

"If I need it." He wipes his eyes, sniffling a little. "I, um. I have some savings. I'll start looking for another job. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, it's okay. But if you do need it, you have to tell me."

"I will. I promise."

They're both quiet for a moment. Scara bites his lower lip. Does Sethos understand what he's saying? Probably not. Scara doesn't even know what he's saying.

"So, um…" Sethos clears his throat. "If I order you to come to the con, will you do it?"

"Yes."

He lets out a breath. "Okay. Well, then. You're coming to the con, and you're going to let me see you and give you a hug."

"Okay," says Scara.

He feels a calmness settle over him. All he has to do is what Sethos says. If Sethos wants to see him, Scara will go. It'll break his heart, but he'll go. He has to. Those are his orders.

"Great. So… now I order you to eat your favorite food for dinner and then snuggle up in your blankets and have a nice, restful sleep."

Scara smiles a little. "Okay," he whispers. "Thanks, honey."

"Of course. Do you, um… do you feel better now?"

"Mhmm," he says, nodding.

"Oh. Good." He clears his throat. "Well, um. We'll talk more tomorrow, okay? I'm sure Tighnari feels bad about what he said. And we can explain to everyone, and we'll make up, and everything will be okay."

"Okay."

"Okay. Good night, baby."

"Night, honey," he replies, and clicks off the call.

Scara wipes his eyes again. He takes a deep breath and grabs his phone, ordering from his favorite restaurant. He watches anime and eats and goes to sleep.

Maybe Sethos will hate him for all the lies. That's alright. It's all in Sethos' hands now. Scara trusts him. Sethos will handle everything. Sethos is smart and sweet and kind, and Scara is his.

Chapter End Notes

> So. Yeah. That happened. Honestly I've been plotting this chapter since the fic started, and I'm so excited for your reactions. Shit just fucking BLEW UP, it's great. We'll be dealing with the fallout for the next couple chapters, and once that's wrapped up... THE ANIME CON. FINALLY. Yes, I have started writing it. I am actually seven chapters ahead right now, so I'm going to update a little more frequently. This con is going to take a while to get through, let me just tell you that right now. But first I have more friend group drama with Tighnari's ex and Scara's reveal (well, one of his reveals) so buckle up. This is so messy.

Chapter 15: What Breed of Crazy-Ass Motherfuckers Did We Let Into This Guild?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tighnari stares at the voice chat. Just stares. She's in there. The girl his ex cheated on him with. Who is also his friend. He wants to believe she didn't know, but part of him is convinced she did, and this is all some elaborate plot by the universe to make him relive his worst memories.

Tighnari was not okay for a long time after the breakup. He's still not. Having it dredged up like this in front of all his friends is painful. He doesn't want to join that chat. He doesn't. But he does need to apologize to Scara for what he said to her, and Cyno convinced him it would be better to do it with the rest of them there for support.

Part of him thinks it's good it happened this way. Even though it hurt—and it still hurts, a lot—it forced him to confront his feelings. He had a nice, long conversation with Cyno about it. It felt good to get it out instead of letting it live inside him and poison his heart. That doesn't mean he's ready to share it with everyone else, though.

He sighs, his hand hovering over his mouse. Ready or not… He clenches his teeth and joins the chat.

"Hey, Nari," says Cyno first, and it bolsters him.

"Hey, guys. I, um." He clears his throat. "I'm sorry about last night."

Everyone waits for a moment. They all know who that apology is for.

"You're sorry?" Scara huffs quietly. "Great, now I look like an ever bigger bitch."

"You're not a bitch," Tighnari says, his voice soft. "I shouldn't have said that to you."

"You had every right," Scara tells him.

"No, I didn't." He takes a deep breath. "Can you tell me what happened from your perspective? And then I can give you mine."

"Yeah, sure," she agrees. She takes a moment before speaking. "The whole ERP thing was kind of an accident, at first. I mean, I just fell into it, really. And then your, ah… your ex, I'm assuming?"

"Yeah, definitely an ex."

She hums. "Good. Because he was an asshole. I mean, they're all kind of assholes, but he was special."

"Oh. He… didn't treat you well?" Tighnari asks.

"No," she says flatly. "That was you on the call, wasn't it? Screaming at him?"

"How much did you hear?"

"Not much," she replies. "He disconnected pretty fast. But I assumed the rest. I mean, I never knew for sure, but I already didn't like him, and… I really hated the idea that I'd done that to someone."

Tighnari swallows the emotion in his throat. "It wasn't your fault," he croaks, even though everything inside him screams that it was. He *knows* it wasn't.

"Oh, come on," says Scara. "I know you're still pissed. There's no way you already let it go."

"Scara," Cyno chides.

"What?"

"He's trying. Can you try too, please?"

Scara lets out a sigh. "Okay. Well, I feel like the biggest fucking cunt in the world, and you were right to call me one, and I swear if you keep apologizing to me I will lose my fucking mind."

"Baby, you're not… that," Sethos says awkwardly.

"Too naughty of a word for you still?" Scara teases him.

"Hang on, sidebar," Kaveh interrupts. "Are you two actually dating now?"

"Uhhh…" Sethos trails off, not answering.

"Ooh, wait, how'd it happen?" Kaveh asks him. "I need to know."

"It didn't!" Sethos says quickly. "It just- um- it's complicated?"

"Mmm, *complicated,"* Kaveh hums.

"That's not what we're talking about right now!" Sethos exclaims. "Scara, would you care to, um…?"

"Hmm?" she hums. "You have orders for me?"

Tighnari's eyes go wide. And then Cyno says suspiciously, "Scara, what have you done to my cousin?"

"I do whatever Sethos tells me to do," she replies.

"O-kay, now is really not the time for this," says Sethos, clearing his throat. "Tighnari, can you please-? The topic? The topic we were discussing?"

Tighnari shakes himself. What the ever loving fuck is going on with those two? Anyway.

"Uh, yeah, so…" He tries to remember what he was going to say. "Well, I was dating this guy. Your client. And we got engaged-"

"Wait, you were *engaged?"* Kaveh gasps, scandalized. "Oh, honey."

"Okay, someone needs to kick Kaveh out of the chat," says Cyno.

"No, no, I'll behave!" Kaveh protests. "Please continue. Sorry to interrupt."

"It's fine," says Tighnari. "Yeah, we were engaged. I moved to Idaho to be with him. And then I found out he was spending thousands on ERP for our entire relationship."

Kaveh makes a noise but thankfully keeps his mouth shut.

Tighnari sighs. "I caught him when I came home early from work. Cue messy breakup, lots of screaming, blah blah blah. What I really want to know is, is your name actually Scara? Because you definitely had a different name back then."

"I did," Scara confirms. "That is my real name. I mean, it's the name I go by IRL, so yeah. I've changed it in game a lot, and my appearance too. Sometimes I have to drop clients, and they try to track me down."

"Why do you use your real name, then?" Tighnari asks her.

She huffs and says, "Because I got them confused a couple of times. I forgot who knew what name, and this one guy blew up at me, and it's just… easier to keep it straight."

Tighnari purses his lips. "Was my ex really that awful to you?" he asks in a small voice.

"Yeah," she says with an ironic laugh. "He wasn't like that with you?"

He shakes his head and says, "No, never. I would have never even guessed he was doing it if I hadn't caught him. He was always so sweet and romantic. It was such a shock."

"Oh. Well. Lucky me, I guess." She hums dismissively. "Well, I'm not doing any of that anymore."

"Oh, you're not?" he asks.

"Nope. Sethos says I'm not allowed."

Sethos' awkward laughter rings through the mic. "Okay, so the situation has been resolved now, right? We're all friends? Yeah? Good. Scara, can I talk to you, please?"

"Sure, honey. See you later, boys."

The call is silent for a long minute after they both leave. "Sooo," Kaveh says eventually. "Anyone have any idea what the fuck that's about?"

"Nope," says Tighnari.

"No, and I'm a little concerned," Cyno replies.

"That's the thing you like, right, Kaveh?" Alhaitham asks him.

"What thing?" says Kaveh.

"The BDSM thing."

"Ohhh," Kaveh replies. "You think that's what it is?"

"Gotta be."

"That's a little kinky for our cute little Mormon dentist, don't you think?" Kaveh remarks.

"Okay, I'm just gonna quietly exit this conversation," says Tighnari.

"Me too, actually," Cyno agrees.

"Wait, *really?"* says Kaveh. "You'll get all up in my sex life but not theirs?"

"Dude, he's my cousin," Cyno says. "I don't want the details."

"Do you think she bullied him into it?" Kaveh asks. "Topping from the bottom?"

"Okay, bye," Tighnari says quickly, leaving the call.

He takes a deep breath. In and out. That went okay. *It's not her fault,* he repeats to himself. He still can't make his heart believe it, but he'll just have to keep trying.

***

"Scara, I'm gonna need you to explain this to me," Sethos says, his heart beating fast.

She hums and says, "Explain what?"

"You know what!"

He buries his face in his hands. He really thought he was getting better at this. He's been reading those romance novels, and he's been talking dirty to Scara for months at this point. He really shouldn't be blushing up a storm over this, but like, genuinely *what the fuck is going on?*

"You can't tell our friends I'm ordering you around!" he protests.

"Okay, but you did give me orders."

"Because you asked me to!"

"Yes," she says, and nothing else.

He grunts in frustration. "Scara," he whines. "What is this? What are we doing? I don't get it."

She lets out a little sigh and says, "I get overwhelmed sometimes, and I like being told what to do. That's all."

"Okay, but… you can't just tell our friends all the… *sex things* we're doing."

"It's not a sex thing, though," she says.

Sethos blinks. "It's not?'

"Not really. I mean, it's a dominance thing."

"That *is* a sex thing!" he protests.

"Sethos, honey. Do you like telling me what to do?"

He flushes all the way down to his neck. "I mean… I like that you're coming to the con now."

"But you do like having someone do what you say?"

"Scara, I don't *know* what I like. I just like *you."*

"So you want to please me, right?"

"Yeah, of course." He shifts in his chair. "Are you saying this is what makes you happy?"

"We don't have to do it if you don't want to."

Sethos bites his lip. What *does* he want? He has to admit it's kind of exciting that Scara is doing what he says now. It means he can make her take care of herself, and he can make her come to meet him. But in a sexual way? He's not really sure.

There were hints of this in some of those books he read. This is so much more than dirty talk, though. Scara wants him to order her around when they're not even on call. That's… weird, right? It's not that he doesn't want to do it, he really just doesn't get it.

"Is there a book on this or something?" he asks her. "I just don't understand what you're asking me to do."

She hums. "I can recommend some books. I, um… I'm sorry, I should've talked this over with you before I told them about it."

"It's okay," says Sethos, hunching his shoulders. "I'm just kind of embarrassed that they know now."

"Awww," she coos. "Don't be. They're all freaks, y'know."

"Oh. Are they?"

Scara snorts and says, "Are you kidding? You think Alhaitham and Kaveh aren't slapping each other around in bed?"

"Slapping…?" he repeats. His cheeks heat again. "Okay, I don't need to know these things about my friends."

"Your cousin's definitely into some shit. He's got a filthy mouth."

"Please stop," he begs her.

She laughs. "Sethos, come on. We had that hot scene the other day. The one where you fucked me in the club, and I tried to stop you?"

"But that was just pretend!" he exclaims. "This is, like, you actually doing things I tell you to do like come to the con and quit your job and… big, serious stuff!"

"We really don't have to do it," she says again.

His heart flutters in his chest. "Why do you *want* to do it?"

"It just makes me feel better to not have to decide," she explains. "I really struggle with making big decisions, and sometimes even little ones. Having someone tell me what to do takes away the pressure."

"Oh," he says softly. "So it's really not sexual?"

"It doesn't have to be. I mean… if you end up liking it in bed, then great. If you don't, that's fine. I still want you."

Sethos can't help a little smile. "Yeah?"

She hums in reply.

"Okay. Well. I'll try it, okay?" He takes a deep breath. "Just don't tell anyone else. That's an order."

"Yes, sir," she purrs.

Sethos feels a little pulse in his groin. What the hell? Is he into that? Sethos didn't know he was into that. Maybe he *can* do this for her. It's what Scara wants, and Sethos wants whatever she wants.

"What else should I do?" she asks him.

"Take a bath," he says breathily. "Touch yourself while you think about me."

He hears her shudder. "Okay. Will you send me a picture of you?"

"Sure."

"With your shirt off?"

He half-smiles. "Okay."

"Mm. Thank you."

"Anything for you, baby. All you gotta do is ask."

She lets out a soft moan. "You're so good to me."

"And you're such a good girl for me," he replies.

Scara yelps. *"Sethos!"* she cries. "Fuck, yes."

"You like that?"

"Yes," she moans desperately.

"Hang up and get in the bath."

"Okay," she says, immediately hanging up the call.

Sethos pants a little. He just got so turned on so fast. It seemed like she did, too. *Good girl.* He'll have to say that more often. He grunts and gets up to lie down in bed. He pulls his shirt off and snaps a photo, trying not to overthink it as he sends it to her. He sets his phone beside him and pulls himself out.

Scara: Sethos, God

Sethos: You praying to God or me, baby?

Scara: You

Sethos shudders. The sacrilege turns him on even more. Crap, how much weird shit is Sethos into? He was just doing this because Scara wanted it. The scene in the club, that was based on the book she sent him. This, though? This is all just letting his imagination run wild. And Sethos is living for it.

Scara: Am I your pretty girl?

Sethos: You are my pretty girl. Only mine

Sethos: I'm the only one you're thinking about, right?

Scara: Always

Sethos: Good. Keep it that way
Sethos: You in the bath?

Scara: Yeah

Sethos: Naked?

Scara: Yeah

Sethos: Touching yourself?

Scara: I'm already close

Sethos: Don't come yet

Scara: But I need it

Sethos: Don't you dare. You want to be good, right?

Scara: Yes sir

Sethos: Rub your clit for me
Sethos: Feel good?

Scara: Yes

Sethos: Think of me watching you. Telling you what a good job you're doing

Scara: Am I doing good?

Sethos: So good, baby

Scara: Sethos

Sethos: Put your fingers inside

Scara: Yes

Sethos: Is it wet in there?

Scara: So wet

Sethos: This is mine, you know

Sethos: Every part of you is mine

Scara: I belong to you
Scara: Please can I come?

Sethos: Yes

He comes in a powerful burst that surprises him. He lies panting after it's over, whimpering to himself. God, what *was* that? Like something just took him over. Maybe he's learned more than he thought from those books and their calls. He just told her what to do and said whatever sounded hot. That was it.

Sethos: Did you come?

Scara: I came so hard

Sethos: Good girl

Scara: SETHOS JESUS FUCK

Sethos: You really like it when I say that

Scara: Yes

Sethos: How come you didn't tell me before?

Scara: I don't know. It's not really something I talk about

Sethos: Aw. You embarrassed?

Scara: Shut up lol
Scara: Honey what in the hell have you been reading??

Sethos: What you sent me!

Scara: That was NOT in there

Sethos: Well I just said what felt right

Scara: God when you said every part of me is yours
Scara: You're good at this

Sethos: Thanks, I learned from a professional

Scara: lol
Scara: It's crazy how you can be so awkward and then so confident

Sethos: It's weird, huh?
Sethos: You make me feel like I can do anything

Scara: You can do anything you want to me, honey

Sethos: Really?

Scara: Really

Sethos: Hmm. Guess I'll have to start thinking of things I want to do to you then

Scara: Like you don't already think about that all the time

Sethos: Caught me
Sethos: Clean yourself up and make sure you rest today
Sethos: It's been a hard couple of days, and you need to take care of yourself

Scara: I want you to take care of me

Sethos: I will
Sethos: You're still coming to the con, right?

Scara: You still want me there?

Sethos: Of course I do

Scara: Then I'll be there

Sethos: Good
Sethos: Now relax. Put in some bath salts and give yourself a little massage
Sethos: Then get dressed and put on your favorite music and don't do anything important for the whole day

Scara: Okay
Scara: Thank you, honey

Sethos: Anytime, baby
Sethos: Have a good day. Let me know if you need anything

Scara: I will

Sethos sighs and clicks his screen off. He brings his hand to his face. *What have I gotten myself into?* he wonders. This is nothing like Sethos ever thought his life would turn out, and yet… Things are getting

better every day. He can't be mad about that.

He'll get to see her soon. The thought comforts him as he goes about the rest of his day with a smile on his face.

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"So…" Alhaitham finally says once everyone else has left the chat. "That was kind of wild."

"Kind of?" Kaveh lets out a sharp bark of laughter. "What breed of crazy-ass motherfuckers did we let into this guild? I'm literally the most normal one here! Is that not fucking terrifying?"

"Yeah, it's pretty scary," he agrees. He crosses his arms over his chest. "At least they made up, I guess?"

Kaveh lets out a chuckle of disbelief. "Yeah, I guess."

Alhaitham purses his lips. "Hey, Kaveh?"

"Yeah?"

"Does it bother you that we didn't really do… any of that stuff?"

"What, BDSM?" Kaveh asks. "No. It's not like I need it."

He shifts in his chair. "I know when we met up, it wasn't what you expected."

"Alhaitham," Kaveh says softly. "That was the most perfect week of my entire life. I wouldn't change a thing about it."

"Really?"

"Really." He lets out a quiet little laugh. "Look, Alhaitham… My life was very different before you. I thought I knew what I liked, what I wanted. And then you just came in and just… completely fucked everything up, honestly."

Alhaitham snorts. "You're welcome."

"Thank you," says Kaveh, laughing. "I love having you in my life."

A sliver of doubt still lingers. Alhaitham purses his lips. "You don't wish I was different?"

"No," Kaveh replies. "Never change, you bastard."

"Okay," Alhaitham says softly. "I love you."

"Love you." He hums, then lets out a long sigh. "I feel like I need a palette cleanser after all that drama. My entire world has been tilted on its axis."

"Yeah, I definitely didn't see any of that coming," Alhaitham agrees. "Let's go fishing."

"What? Fishing?" Kaveh repeats.

"There's this leather jacket I want."

"Ohh," Kaveh intones. "You want me for the buffs so you can catch more fish."

"Yeah," he admits. "I need to farm koi. I'm broke."

Kaveh tsks over the line. "I told you not to buy those wings."

"I needed the wings," Alhaitham protests.

"Are you going to wear the leather jacket with the wings?"

"No, that's a different outfit."

"You do not need any more outfits," Kaveh says flatly.

"I do, though." He pulls up the Genshin launcher. "Come on. We'll have a nice, relaxing Sunday fishing together in Liyue."

"Okay, babe," Kaveh says in a cutesy voice. "Anything for you."

Alhaitham smiles to himself. There's something else he wants to say. Something he figured out a awhile ago but hasn't voiced yet. He presses his lips together tightly.

"Hey, Kaveh?"

"Yeees?" Kaveh asks.

He takes a deep breath. "I think I'm gay."

"Oh. You think?"

"Yeah."

"It's okay not to be sure," Kaveh reminds him. "The label doesn't really matter all that much."

"It matters to me," Alhaitham insists.

"Alright. Well, congrats!" He hears Kaveh clap his hands. "I'll get you a rainbow pin."

"Thanks," says Alhaitham. He smiles to himself. It feels good to finally say. "I guess I just realized… I don't have to fit into a box. You know? And it's not that bad, being gay."

Kaveh scoffs and says, "What do you mean, 'not that bad'?"

Alhaitham sighs. "Don't take this personally, okay?"

"Oh, that's a great lead-up."

"I kind of had this image in my head," Alhaitham tries to explain. "Of what a gay guy was. You know? All campy and shit. Like you."

Kaveh gasps dramatically. "How dare you call me campy!" He laughs afterward. "No, I know what you mean. I definitely lean in to the stereotype."

"Yeah, you do," Alhaitham agrees. "But that doesn't mean I have to."

Kaveh coos at him, and Alhaitham rolls his eyes. "You figured this out all by yourself?"

"Shut up."

"You could have asked me, you know," Kaveh points out, but his tone is gentle. "You don't have to try to do everything by yourself. You're not alone anymore."

Alhaitham feels a little lump in his throat, and he has to swallow around it. "Thanks," he says hoarsely.

"Of course! I live for gay awakenings." Alhaitham sees the party invite pop up, and he clicks to accept. Kaveh hums happily. "We should throw you a coming out party."

"Absolutely not," Alhaitham says immediately.

"Aw, but you love my parties!" Kaveh whines.

"No gay parties."

"All my parties are gay."

Alhaitham snorts and says, "True. We just had a wedding, though. I don't know if I can handle you freaking out about your decorations again with so little time to recover in between."

"Oh, you know Tighnari gets it way worse than you," Kaveh points out. "Speaking of Tighnari. What do you think is going to happen when he sees Cyno?"

"He'll jump his bones."

Kaveh laughs. "Yeah?"

"Definitely."

"I think so, too," says Kaveh. He sighs happily. "Love is in the air."

"Do you think we qualify as matchmakers?" Alhaitham asks him. "Since we got everyone together?"

"I'd say we're pros."

"Nice. Good work. Totally intentional, by the way."

"Oh, absolutely."

They arrive together at their usual fishing spot. Kaveh casts his line, and Alhaitham follows. They laugh and needle each other as they fish together, both enjoying the company. *You're not alone anymore,* Alhaitham thinks, and his heart warms.

Chapter End Notes

> Aw look, they all made up. Sidebar, what the hell is going on with Sethos and Scara? Even your author doesn't know. I swear I didn't plan that part, it just kind of happened. Oh well. Unfortunately this will be their last sex scene in... a while. You'll just have to wait until Cynonari get to the con for more smut. I'm still way ahead of what I've posted here so forgive the chaotic update schedule. I really just want to get you guys to the con ASAP cause I'm sooo excited for your reactions!
>
> The support for this fic has been overwhelming in the best way! My readers are amazing, and I love you so muuuuch ♥

Chapter 16: I Must've Forgotten to Drink My Dumb Bitch Juice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scara's finger hovers over the mouse button. He shouldn't do this. It will be awkward. They already settled things amicably enough, and he should just leave it there. It's just… He feels so guilty about hurting Tighnari. Sure, it was years ago, and he didn't know the full situation back then. But he does now.

Scara's been through a lot in his life, to say the least, but nothing's worse than knowing he hurt somebody else. It's funny because you wouldn't have thought that about him when he was younger. He was quick with harsh words and prided himself on his shitty attitude. It's taken a lot to get where he is today, and he's kind of realizing now that he still has a long way to go. Maybe part of why he hasn't gone back to therapy yet is that he knows how far he's come, and it feels like he should be done already.

For most of his life, Scara never considered other peoples' feelings. Empathy was something he had to learn (and boy, is he kicking himself for that right about now). It's strange to think that he genuinely wants to let someone else be in control. The truth is that other people are just better than he is. Kinder, smarter, gentler. Sethos is definitely better. Scara can't always see the right decision, but he trusts Sethos to make it.

Maybe he should trust himself, too, once in awhile. Because he really wants to reach out to Tighnari and make this better somehow. He's not sure exactly how, but shouldn't he at least try?

He bites his lower lip. Before he can think better of it, he hits the call button. It rings a few times before Tighnari picks up. Neither of them say anything for a moment.

"Hi," Scara tries softly.

"Hi," Tighnari replies.

The silence is deafening. "I just…" He doesn't even know what to say. Fuck, why did he call him when he has no idea what to say?

"Are you going to apologize again?" Tighnari asks. "Because you don't need to."

"No," Scara denies. "I… was just going to ask if you wanted to run a dungeon with me."

"Right. In a private call. When the only time we've DMed was you waving and me sending you death threats."

"Mhmm."

After a moment, Tighnari huffs. "Okay," he says, accepting the terrible excuse. Scara lets out a sigh of relief. "Let me tell Cyno so he doesn't try to butt in."

"That would be good."

"Since this is a very special dungeon that you absolutely need, and we can't be interrupted."

"Yep."

The call is awkward as they both log into the game and queue up for the dungeon. Scara tries to run through things he could say in his head, but it's frustratingly blank. He just wants to make this better, and he doesn't know how to make it better.

"I'm still trying really hard not to blame you," Tighnari finally says, his voice quiet.

"Why?" Scara asks him. "I almost feel like… I'd feel better about it if you did blame me."

"You think?"

"Yeah."

A moment of silence, and then, "Okay, well, you're a fucking bitch."

Scara takes in a shaky breath. "I know."

"I want to reach through the screen and wring your neck."

"You should."

"How could you do that to me?" he goes on. "He was my fiance! We were going to get married."

"I'm sorry."

Tighnari scoffs. Their queue pops, and they both accept. "Honestly, you did me a favor."

"Did I?"

"Yeah, 'cause I obviously didn't marry him after that. Can you imagine?"

Scara swallows, his other hand going to his keyboard as they load into the instance. "I can. I wonder how many of my clients were married. It's so easy to cheat when it's online."

"Ha! Yeah, you can hide it from your partner for years," Tighnari says bitterly. "God, that son of a bitch. You know how much he spent on ERP? I went through *all* the bank statements."

"Really?" Scara asks.

"Yeah, he showed me all of them. Full transparency, he said. He was trying to get me to stay."

"Thank God you didn't fall for that."

"Yeah. I have my moments, but I must've forgotten to drink my dumb bitch juice for once."

Scara snorts. The dungeon starts, and they play through it mindlessly. He just went with a random one, and it's cryo-themed. Their characters breathe in puffs of white air on a snowy mountain.

"How much was it? Total?" he asks Tighnari.

"Seven thousand, six hundred ninety-two dollars and twenty-eight cents."

Scara blinks, surprised he can remember the exact figure. "Shit. Well, that definitely wasn't all me."

"Oh, no," Tighnari laughs. "He offered to block all of them if it got me to stay. There were thirty-six names."

"Shit. That's an impressive level of degeneracy, and this is coming from me."

Tighnari lets out a sharp bark of laughter. He calms, and it's quiet for

a moment. "I just can't believe I didn't see it. After I caught him I went through every memory of him trying to find a red flag somewhere, and I couldn't. He had me completely fooled."

Scara purses his lips and says, "Is that what you're worried about with Cyno?"

"Hmph. Hit the nail right on the head," says Tighnari. "You know, for a dumb ho, you're actually kind of smart."

"I try my best," says Scara, laughing a little.

There's another pause. "I'm sorry for insulting you all the time. I don't know why I do it."

"I know you don't mean it. It really doesn't bother me," he replies.

"You sure?"

"Mhmm. Believe me, I have heard far worse from far more disgusting guys than you."

"Oh. That sucks," Tighnari mutters.

"Aw. Don't go feeling sorry for me, Nari. I got myself into this mess." He pops his sprint as they run between packs of enemies. "At least it's over now. It's honestly a huge relief."

"You're really stopping just like that?"

Scara shrugs. "Sethos told me to."

"Hmm." Tighnari's character glows with healing energy as they engage the next pack of monsters. "How long has that been going on?"

"The whole thing, or just the part where I do what he says?"

"The second part," Tighnari clarifies. "Not that I judge you or anything, but I know for a fact that was not Sethos' idea."

Scara snorts and says, "No, it wasn't. That part's recent. I don't know, it just makes me feel better when someone else is making the decisions. I feel paralyzed sometimes, and I just don't know what to do. It's easier to listen to someone I trust."

"I get it. I heard you're coming to the con now?"

Scara smiles sadly thinking about it. He knows it's going to be devastating when he gets there and Sethos finally figures out the truth he's been hiding all this time. It'll be good to see him, though. Maybe he'll still let Scara hug him. Is that too much to hope for?

"Yeah, I am," he says.

"It's coming up fast. Only a few more weeks."

Scara huffs a little. "Are you ready to see Cyno?"

Tighnari lets out a long sigh. "Not at all. I told him I would finally make a decision."

"About?"

"Whether I'll give him a shot."

"Hmm. Cyno's a good guy, you know," Scara says gently. "I mean… I can't tell you he'd never cheat on you because the truth is you never really know for sure. But if you're gonna take a chance on somebody, I think he's a good chance to take."

"I think so, too," Tighnari replies. "There's just… kind of a mental block there, you know? Even after all this time."

"Oh, I know," he says with a huff. An idea suddenly occurs to him, and he straightens up in his chair. "You know what we should do?"

"What?"

"We should get revenge on your cheating ex."

Tighnari sputters. "Revenge?" he repeats. He lets out a chuckle. "Well… You know I would love to because I'm a petty bitch like that, but what could we possibly do?"

Scara thinks quickly, the plan forming in his mind. "He was into some gross stuff. Like, stuff that gave *me* pause. What if we made it public?"

"What kind of scheme are you cooking up, Scara?" Tighnari asks him.

"Okay, hear me out," Scara says. "I unblock him and send him a message about a session. When he accepts, and he will, I record it and post it on the internet. I'll say a bunch of weird shit, the type of shit he's into, and then everyone will know what a freak he is."

Tighnari lets out a string of little giggles. "That would be pretty fucking funny."

"We could even tag his employer."

A sharp laugh comes next, and Tighnari says, "What, and try to get him fired?"

"Yeah," says Scara eagerly, a feral grin on his face.

"He would deserve it, honestly."

"Yeah, and get this," Scara goes on. "Guys like this can't stop. He's definitely still spending big on ERP. And I bet you he's decently attractive if you moved all the way to Idaho for him."

Tighnari tsks. "Yeah, unfortunately, he is."

"So there's a pretty good chance he's found another boyfriend by now. Or girlfriend, or whatever. Think about that. He's probably doing the same thing he did to you to someone else right now. Cheaters never learn."

This seems to sober Tighnari up. "You should do it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I mean… yeah!" He laughs wickedly. "I gave up on getting even years ago, but if we can pull this off? Oh, man. We'll be shitheads for doing it, but I don't fucking care."

"Okay. I just have to get permission from Sethos. Let me message him." Scara quickly grabs his phone and types between his rotation.

"You'd really do this for me?" Tighnari questions. "I thought you were done with that shit."

"Might as well go out with a bang," Scara says with a shrug.

"I mean, if you want to. Everyone will know about the ERP, though. He'll use your name."

"He still thinks my name is… what, Jinx, I think?"

Tighnari hums. "That's right. That was the name you were using then."

"I won't unblock him on Genshin, just Discord. So there's no harm." He

grins. "Except to him, of course. But the bastard has it coming."

They get through the rest of the dungeon talking details of the plan, and then Sethos replies. Scara squeals and immediately messages him back.

Sethos: Are you sure that's what you want to do?

Scara: I want to do it for Tighnari. This fucker ruined his life

Sethos: You don't have to feel guilty for it. You didn't know

Scara: I know. But it would make me feel better, plus this guy is a fucking dick and he deserves it

Sethos: Oh I agree
Sethos: I just want to make sure you don't hurt yourself doing this

Scara: Thank you. I'll be fine
Scara: Think about it. If this helps Tighnari get closure then he and Cyno can get together
Scara: And you know how much Cyno wants that

Sethos: That's true
Sethos: Okay baby. If this is really what you want then you have permission. Just this once

Scara: tyyyy ♥

"He said yes!" Scara shouts. He rubs his hands together gleefully. "Let's get this fucker."

***

Tighnari doesn't know how to feel about this little plot, honestly. Ever since the breakup, his shitbag ex has just taken up so much space in his brain. He's finally realized (several years too late) that he was the one letting that happen. Yes, it was an awful experience. But the reason it's still ruining his life is because he refuses to move on and let himself heal. Why is he still doing this to himself? He's sabotaging his own future by fixating on his past mistakes, and he needs to stop.

That being said… the revenge feels *good.*

Sethos and Cyno are both in the voice chat when Scara unleashes hell upon TikTok. She managed to dig up the asshole's Twitch account—Tighnari had no idea he'd started streaming games—and he actually

has a little bit of a following there. Nothing that impressive, but it means they can ruin his hobby, too.

The recording is incriminating. Tighnari wouldn't have guessed he was into half that shit. Scara starts meowing at one point and then roleplays pissing on him. It's super fucking embarassing, and Tighnari is *howling* throughout the entire thing. Scara is good, he'll give her that. If this is the type of shit these guys ask her to do… Damn, she's really been through it.

Scara joins the chat, and Tighnari instantly says, "You are a genius. I take back everything bad I ever said about you."

"Thanks, honey," she says sweetly. "We'll have to see how much attention it gets."

"You actually have a lot of TikTok followers," Cyno points out. "I hope they blast it everywhere."

"I'm posting to Twitter, too, so I can tag his work," she says. Tighnari hears her keyboard clacking over the mic. "Done!" She lets out a happy sigh. "That was fun."

"Glad you had fun, baby," says Sethos.

Within an hour, the video has racked up thousands of views. It's not even a full day before it has a million. The asshole's employer releases a statement that this behavior doesn't reflect their values, and he's no longer associated with the company. His Twitch is tanked, too. Everyone is clowning on him, and Tighnari feels *so* vindicated. There's a little guilt there, underneath it all—did he really deserve all this? Sure, he was an asshole, and Tighnari absolutely doesn't regret it, but he does feel a little bad that it worked this well. They couldn't have predicted the video going viral, though.

Cyno calls him after lunch, and Tighnari is still reeling as he reads all the comments people are leaving. They're tearing the guy apart, and the feral side of Tighnari is very satisfied with how vicious everyone is being.

"Hey, Nari," says Cyno when he picks up.

"Hey," he replies.

"So, uh… This whole thing kinda blew up, huh?"

Tighnari lets out a little cackle. "Yeah, it did."

"How's it feel?" Cyno asks him.

"Good. Mostly."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he confirms. "I mean, I do feel a *little* bad."

"Mmm," Cyno hums doubtfully. "I mean, it went a bit farther than you guys intended, but… I feel like he deserves it for hurting you and being a dick to Scara, too. I'm just surprised he took the bait, honestly."

Tighnari snorts. "I'm not. He was never the brightest." He logs into Genshin. "You want to play for a bit?"

"Sure. Whatcha been up to this morning?"

Tighnari sighs and says, "Just… thinking."

"Thinking about what?" Cyno asks.

"You."

"Aww. Really?" Cyno sounds pleased.

"Yeah," Tighnari admits. "And my ex. And how you're nothing like him."

Cyno hums. "In a good way?"

"Definitely." He invites Cyno to a party and asks, "What do you want to do?"

"Ugh, I need samachurl mats for my weapon," he groans.

"That's gay," says Tighnari. "I can pull up the interactive map so we can farm."

"Without a DPS? It'll take forever."

"I can go DPS mode," Tighnari protests. "Do you doubt my skills?"

He chuckles. "Never. Okay, I'll follow you."

"'Kay." Tighnari pulls up the map and teleports to their first location.

Cyno does the same after him.

"So," says Cyno as they begin their hilichurl slaughter. "You were thinking about me, huh?"

"Maybe. A little."

"Any dirty thoughts in there?"

Tighnari snorts. Once Cyno has gathered the enemies, he burns them quickly. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"I really would," he says.

"You have such a one-track mind."

"Do not," Cyno argues. "You can think about me in a non-dirty way if you want."

"Wow, I'm so glad I have your permission," Tighnari remarks.

"Yeah, you're welcome." He laughs a little. "Were you thinking about your decision?"

Tighnari bites his lower lip. "Kind of."

"Come on, Nari. Tell me what you're thinking. Talk to me."

He sighs. He teleports them to the next location, taking a moment to consider his words. "I was just thinking… Have I been holding myself back this whole time? How much of what I've done over the last few years has been out of fear?"

"It's alright to be afraid," Cyno says softly.

"Not when it keeps you from living your life," Tighnari disagrees. "I lost most of my friends after the breakup, too, y'know. It was my fault. I accused them of not being supportive. They were doing the best they could, but I refused to listen to them."

"Hmm. That's hard."

"It was. And then I had to go back home and face my mom. She was kind of against the move. I had to tuck my tail between my legs and move back in with them for a bit until I found a place again. She never said 'I told you so' or anything. But I felt so stupid. And I knew I never wanted to go through that again."

"That's fair," says Cyno. "I know it hurt a lot. Don't blame yourself for trying to protect your heart. You did the best you could, okay?"

Tears prick Tighnari's eyes. "How can you still be so understanding? Seriously, I'm racking my brain trying to figure out why you haven't given up yet. I'm a dick to you all the time, I never say anything nice to you, and you just keep coming back for more. What is it about me that makes you so convinced I'm the right person for you?"

Cyno hums thoughtfully. "I think there's just something about you I understand. You know, like on a deep level. We think the same way, you and me. Sometimes we're talking and you just say exactly what's on my mind, and I'm like, 'He gets it.' You can see through bullshit in an instant, and you're not afraid to call it out. You definitely hold some things back, but not your emotions. You feel deeply, and you don't hide it. You're not ashamed of it. I guess I just feel like… I see the real you, and you see the real me. That's all I want. That's all I've ever wanted."

Tighnari has to swallow the lump in his throat. A couple of tears fall, and he brushes them away. "I feel it, too. The connection. Like we understand each other."

"Yeah," Cyno breathes.

"You'd do anything for me, wouldn't you?" Tighnari asks him.

"Anything," he replies.

Tighnari purses his lips. "That scares me a little."

"I know it does." He huffs softly. "It's crazy to think how gone I am for you, and we've never even met."

"We will," Tighnari reminds him.

"Yeah." Cyno chuckles. "You know, whatever you decide… I hope you'll stay in my life. Even if I can never have you in the way I want. I can handle it. It'll hurt, but I'd rather hurt than lose you."

Tighnari can't help a little whimper. He covers his mouth immediately. More tears. Dammit.

"You okay?" Cyno asks him.

He sniffles and nods. "Yeah. I think…" He swallows thickly again. "I

just… I'm really excited to see you."

"Are you?" Cyno teases. "I'm excited to see you, too."

"Yeah, I know. Everyone knows."

"'Cause I just can't hide it."

Tighnari laughs through his tears, wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry for making you wait."

"Don't apologize," says Cyno. "I know you're worth the wait."

And for the first time, Tighnari actually dares to believe that might be true.

Chapter End Notes

> Tighnari's gonna make it, you guys! Hope you enjoyed the fun chapter because I'm about to drop another bomb on you.

Chapter 17: For the Last Time, Our Guild Members Are Not Your Babies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There comes a day when Sethos can no longer avoid talking about his childhood in therapy. The thing is, he knows it's going to be bad. That's why it's taken him so long. He's just afraid of Nahida's reaction. He knows she's going to misinterpret everything.

Sethos keeps a lot of things close to the chest, like little shards of glass in his heart that he refuses to take out. He just knows it will hurt worse if he takes them out. Sethos always tries to avoid pain where he can. It's easier to just go on and try to ignore it. He's learning, though, that letting things hurt is the only way for them to get better. He hates that—honestly, it sucks, and it's not fair—but that's how it is.

Things *are* getting better. Sethos is getting better. But he knows as soon as he starts talking about this it's going to completely ruin his ability to ignore the pain. When he speaks these words into existence, he'll never be able to take them back. So he's very careful when he describes his parents and how they treated him when he was younger. He knows he's going to have to say it eventually, but he spends almost the entire session talking around it, giving hints without ever admitting anything.

"It sounds like they had high expectations for you," Nahida comments.

"They weren't that high," Sethos argues, immediately jumping to their defense.

Nahida raises an eyebrow. "No?"

"No," he insists. "Keeping my grades up and following house rules was, like, the bare minimum I could do."

"Those house rules sounded pretty strict to me."

"They wanted to teach me discipline."

"Hmm." Nahida looks like she's calculating something. Sethos gulps. "You've mentioned punishment a few times now. How they would lock

you in your room?"

"Yeah, they did," he says nervously.

She nods slowly. "Did it frighten you? To be locked away like that?"

He lets out a steady exhale and says, "Yeah. It was pretty scary."

"How long did they leave you in there?"

Sethos is starting to sweat. "Sometimes it was just a few hours."

"Mhmm. And… sometimes it was longer?"

He closes his eyes. "Yes."

"How much longer?"

Sethos doesn't want to answer. He fights it for several long, quiet moments.

"Why are you afraid to tell me, Sethos?" she asks him gently.

"Because you'll misunderstand," he says, huffing out a short exhale as his eyes snap open. "They did it because they love me. Because they want me to succeed. How can I succeed if there are no consequences when I fail?"

"I want you to imagine something for me," Nahida says to him. "I want you to imagine that you have a child. A child you love more than anything else in this world. How would you encourage them to succeed?"

"I…" He stops, taking a moment to think about it. "I'd tell them they're strong enough to do anything. And that if they ever need help, I'll be there. And I'd make sure they know I'll always love them no matter what, even if they do fail."

Nahida nods on the screen. After a moment, she asks, "You wouldn't lock them in their room if they failed?"

"No," Sethos admits.

"Why not?"

He swallows thickly. This is it. This is the truth he's been running away from since he was a kid. Fuck, he has to say it, doesn't he?

"Because that would be cruel," he whispers. Sethos can't look at the screen. He doesn't want to see her face.

The shard presses deeper into his heart. Sethos can feel the hurt, the hurt he's spent so long ignoring. The hurt he's lived with all these years because it's too painful to admit. He knows he has to pull it out, but he can't make himself do it.

"So it's cruel if it happens to someone else, but not if it happens to you?" Nahida asks, prodding him further.

"That's different," says Sethos. "I deserved it."

Nahida says nothing. Sethos eventually looks back at the screen. There's a serious expression on her face as she says softly, "No, Sethos. No, you didn't."

And that's where Sethos breaks down completely. He can't accept that. He can't accept that his parents were cruel to him without reason. They had reasons. But when he thinks about it… No reason would justify what they did to him. He knows that now. He's kind of known that the whole time, he just couldn't acknowledge it.

Nahida extends their session, and Sethos hears his phone ping a couple times. He's her last appointment of the day, but he still feels bad he's keeping her from getting off work. She talks him through his distress, his hurt, the sharp pain he always carries in his heart. Sethos hates talking about it, and he hates it even more when she says, "I don't mean to put words in your mouth, but I do want you to know that what you're describing is abuse."

"It's not," says Sethos instantly.

"You may not be ready to call it that, and that's alright. You don't have to think of it that way. I'm not licensed to give you any diagnoses, but I am primarily a trauma therapist. What you went through was traumatic in a lot of ways, and I'd like to dig deeper into it going forward, if you're okay with that."

Sethos shrinks his shoulders. "Not really, but I guess… it's the only way things are going to get better, right?" She nods, and he lets out a heavy exhale. "Okay. I'll try."

"Good." She gives him a sad little smile. "You can heal from this, Sethos. It will be a long, hard road, but you took the first step today. All you have to do is keep taking little steps, and eventually, you'll get

there."

"Okay." He breathes in shakily. "Thank you, Nahida."

"You're welcome. Can you do something for me, Sethos?"

"Yeah," he says.

"Take a few minutes after this call to recenter yourself. Lie down in bed for at least fifteen minutes, longer if you need. Just sit with this for a bit."

"I usually call Scara after our sessions," says Sethos. "But… I don't really want to right now."

"You don't have to," she assures him. "I'm sure she'll understand. Just tell her you need a moment. Then turn your phone off and take some time for yourself."

Sethos nods and whispers, "Okay."

Nahida smiles softly. "I know how much courage it took for you to tell me this. You are strong, Sethos, and you will get through this."

"Okay," he says again.

They say goodnight. Sethos knows he should at least send a message to Scara so she doesn't worry, but he can't right now. It seems like an impossible task. He switches on DND and shuts his computer down, then goes to lie down in bed.

He feels… He doesn't know what he feels, but it's overwhelming. He snuggles up with his pillow and closes his eyes.

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Sethos comes to with a start, blinking in the light. Why are all his lights still on? It takes him a long, groggy moment to remember. When he does, he groans and covers his eyes, wishing he could forget.

He goes for a glass of water and something to eat, not checking out his phone until he's sitting at his desk with his sandwich. He bites his lip as he reads the messages from Scara.

Scara: Hey honey. Session go okay?
Scara: Message me when you can
Scara: I hope you're alright. You'd better be taking care of yourself.

You'll have me to answer to if you don't
Scara: Have a good night, honey. Get some rest. Let me know when you wake up please?

Sethos: Hey, I'm okay. Sorry I fell asleep. Hard session

To his surprise, Scara replies within a few seconds.

Scara: Oh thank God you're alright. You had me worried

Sethos: I'm sorry

Scara: Don't be sorry
Scara: Do you need support?

Sethos: It's the middle of the night

Scara: So?

Sethos: You should be asleep

Scara: Honey you are a million times more important to me than sleep

Sethos can't help tearing up again. God, why is he being so emotional? He types his next message out shakily.

Sethos: Can I call you?

Scara immediately starts a call. Sethos accepts.

"Hey," she says, her voice still soft with sleep. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"No," he whispers. "We… we talked about when I was a kid."

"Oh." She's quiet for a moment. "You've never told me about that."

Sethos swallows thickly. "I've never told anyone. It was… pretty bad."

Scara hums. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He doesn't know what to say. "Can you just talk to me for a bit? About anything. I just want to hear your voice."

"Sure, honey. Let me tell you about this piece I'm working on for my portfolio."

"Okay, sure."

He listens to her talk. First about art, then about a trip to the grocery store, then about her overbearing aunt who keeps calling her asking her if she has a boyfriend yet.

"I told her about you to get her off my back," Scara explains.

Sethos' heart races. "Did you?"

"Mhm. I- Uh… sorry."

"Don't apologize, baby. I'll be your boyfriend for a few minutes."

Scara giggles. "Thanks. Appreciate it."

Sethos looks at the clock. It's almost 4am. "Are you tired?"

"Not too tired to talk to you," she insists. "You know I'm a gremlin. You're the one that has work in a few hours."

"I think I'll call out today," says Sethos.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"When was the last time you called out of work?" she asks him.

Sethos thinks about it, then shrugs. "I don't think I have since I started the practice."

"Sethos!" Scara chides him. "Okay, definitely take a day off. Is there anything fun to do in Utah?"

"I could go for a hike."

"Oh, gross," says Scara, and Sethos laughs.

"There are some beautiful hiking trails around here."

"Yes, sure, go immerse yourself in nature, you fucking weirdo. And then go do something actually fun." She gasps. "Wait, Sethos. You've never had alcohol, right?"

"No," he replies.

"Oh, we are so getting you drunk at this con."

He chuckles and says, "Sure."

"Really? You'll do it?"

"I'll do it for you," he says.

"Aww," she coos. "Okay. We'll plan on that. I'm sure Kaveh knows a good club we can take you to. Ooh, you know what? We should hit a gay club."

Sethos sputters and says, "A gay club? Why would you go to a gay club?"

"Gay clubs are better than regular clubs," Scara says. "Come with me. You'll see."

"Okay," he says doubtfully.

"Just don't tell them you're a Mormon or they won't let you in. Actually, no, hang on. They'd probably let you in for free. Definitely tell them."

"I'm not a Mormon," Sethos reminds her.

"Mmm, I don't know, Sethos. You're still drinking the Kool-Aid every week."

"I'm not," he insists. "I… I'm going to leave. For good."

She gasps. "Really?"

"Yeah," he says, determination rising inside him. "I don't want to let them control me anymore. I'm going to sell my practice and move to Arizona."

"Whoa, whoa, hang on," Scara says. "You don't have to do it all at once."

"I do." The more seconds pass, the more certain Sethos becomes. He has to do this. He has to get away from them once and for all. "It's like you said: it's my life. I get to decide how I live it, not them."

"Okay, well. I think it would be really good for you," she says softly. "Just be sure it's what you really want before you go doing a bunch of things you can't take back."

"I have to get away," he tells her. "My parents are… I mean, they

were…" He gulps and says firmly, "No, they still are."

"Are what?" Scara questions.

Sethos takes a deep breath. "Abusive."

It's such a dirty word. Sethos doesn't even like thinking it, much less saying it. But that's the reality, isn't it? Sethos was abused. He doesn't know what to do with that—he just knows he has to stop it, *now*.

Scara takes in a soft breath. "Oh. I… You never…"

"I never said anything, I know." Sethos breathes in carefully through his nose. "Scara, I need a plan to get away from them. To get out of this shitty state."

"Damn fucking right you do," Scara agrees instantly. "Okay, um. They know you're going to the con, right?"

"Right."

"What if you just… don't go back?" she suggests. "Pack up your stuff and ship it. You can worry about selling your house and the practice once you're safe."

"Where will I go?"

"You'll stay with me."

Sethos sputters, shaking his head. "I can't do that."

"You can," she says firmly. "Just… just promise me that whatever happens at the con, you won't let it… I mean… Just let me help you get away from them. Okay? No matter what you think about me after you meet me, I promise I really, really care about you, and I *have* to make sure you're safe. Even if you hate me."

"I won't hate you," he says.

"Just promise me," Scara insists. "Promise you won't go back to Utah. No matter what happens, you'll come with me."

Sethos bites his lower lip. Why is she so sure he'll hate her? What could she possibly be hiding? "Scara, will you please tell me what it is? This big secret you're keeping?"

"I…" She whimpers over the call. "You'll see when we get there. Just

promise me."

He hesitates. He could order her to tell him. But no, he doesn't need to. The con is next week. It's *next week.* "Scara, how will I possibly get everything together by then? All my stuff ready to go? I'll be hanging the practice out to dry."

"I'm sure they'll understand, honey. You have to get out of there. The most important thing right now is that you're safe."

"Okay," he whispers. "Okay, you're right. Once I leave, I'm not coming back."

As soon as he says it, Sethos' heart is set free. It's like everything that's been weighing him down for his entire life just disappears. The fear of disappointing his parents, the worry that he'll never be good enough for anyone. Sethos can escape all that. So what if it's running away? He deserves to start over, right? After everything he's been through?

"Are you sure it's okay that I stay with you?" he asks her.

"Of course. I mean… I don't have an extra bed or anything, but-"

"Oh?" Sethos can't help a little smile. "Guess I'm sleeping next to you, baby."

She huffs into her mic. "Did you see the rooms Alhaitham got for the con?"

"No. Why, are they bad?"

"We're in the same one, and there's only one bed. Cyno and Tighnari, too. Love how he just offered to pay for them all and then didn't disclose that little detail until it was too late to change anything. Asshole."

Sethos chuckles and says, "It's okay. We only need one bed."

Another huff. "God, Sethos. I know this is all going to end when we get there, but… you'll still be my friend, right?"

"Yeah." He takes a breath. "Whatever it is, baby… you're still you. And I'll love you either way."

She makes a soft, surprised noise. "Sethos. I love you, too," she whispers.

Sethos' heart sings. Everything will be okay.

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"Our evil plan is working!" Kaveh cackles.

Alhaitham sighs over the call. "Yes, all credit to the villainous mastermind."

"Nari's reaction was hilarious." Kaveh claps his hands eagerly, then hums in contentment.

"Yeah. I wonder where Sethos was last night."

"Not sure." He frowns. "Think he's okay?"

"Hope so. Haven't heard from either one of them today."

"Hmm. Well, I'm sure they'll take care of each other," says Kaveh, waving it off. "They're so sweet. And *kinky*. My sweet, kinky babies."

"For the last time, our guild members are not your babies," says Alhaitham flatly.

"Ssh! I'm their mom, and you can't gaslight me otherwise." He sighs happily. "My children are in love. There's no better feeling."

"Don't count your chickens before they hatch," Alhaitham warns him.

Kaveh scoffs. "What, you don't think they're going to get together? Sethos and Scara are pretty much there already. I mean, not that either of them will say a peep about it, but surely seeing each other will cement their big, *hetero* feelings."

"Why did you say hetero like that?"

"It's unnatural," Kaveh sniffs. "Plus, we both know Cyno is jumping Nari the second they get there."

"That doesn't mean they'll be boyfriends," Alhaitham points out.

"Hush, you! Stop shitting all over my dreams!"

"I'm just being realistic. Tighnari's clearly got some fucking issues."

"Don't we all?" Kaveh points out. "He's been fighting it for so long, I can just tell he's about to crack. They're so in love. Both of them.

They'll work it out! Have a little faith."

"In these degenerates?" Alhaitham scoffs. "No way."

Kaveh giggles. He lets it go, sighing as he leans back in his chair. "Isn't it so lucky we all found each other?"

"Yeah," Alhaitham says softly. "You know, sometimes I feel like… I've been looking for you my whole life, I just didn't know it."

"Aww." Kaveh places a hand to his chest. "Love you, Haitham."

"Love you." There's a brief pause. "You know, I've been thinking."

"Thinking about what?" Kaveh asks him.

"Packing up my entire life and moving across the country."

Kaveh suddenly sits up straight in his chair. "What? Really?"

"Yeah. Nice weather in California, I've heard."

"Weather?" Kaveh repeats. "You want to move to California for the *weather?"*

"No, you fucking moron, I want to move there to be with you."

A wide smile spreads across Kaveh's face. "You do?"

"Yeah."

"Don't you have a house in Philadelphia?" Kaveh points out.

"I'll sell it."

"What about your job?"

"I work in finance. I'll have a job no matter where I go."

"What about your friends?"

"What, do you not want me to move there?" Alhaitham asks, sounding a little annoyed.

"No!" Kaveh exclaims. "I mean, of course I do! It's just… throwing your whole life away for me is crazy."

"I'm not throwing my life away. You are my life."

Tears spring to Kaveh's eyes. "You…" He trails off, speechless. He lets out a shocked little laugh. "You mean it?"

"Why would I lie about that?"

"I don't know." Kaveh swallows the tears back. "I've been thinking, too."

"Yeah?" Alhaitham prompts him.

"Yeah. About packing up and moving across the country."

Alhaitham snorts. "Well, that'd be fucking stupid. Then we'd still be on opposite sides."

Kaveh lets out a sharp bark of laughter. "You're such an asshole," he complains, but he can't stop giggling. "I guess only one of us has to move. So which one will it be?"

"You know what?" says Alhaitham. "I don't even care."

"We'll figure it out. Either way… we'll be together." His smile is blinding. He can't contain his joy, and it comes out in a squeak. "You really think we can do this? Take a real shot at this?"

Alhaitham hums softly. "I'm ready to risk it all. Are you?"

"Yeah," Kaveh says. "Yeah, I am. I love you so much, Alhaitham."

"Love you, too, Kaveh."

He laughs and thinks of the future. Both of them together, side-by-side. He can't imagine anything better.

Chapter End Notes

> Again I must apologize to Sethos for heaping trauma upon him. Hey, at least he'll get to meet the girl of his dreams at the con, right? ...RIGHT?
>
> Speaking of the con, guess what's next chapter?? I mean it's not technically the con yet because they meet the day before, but... I know you all have been waiting for this. The first night is a two-parter so I'm going to try to get the next chapter out soon, but then I know you're all going to be foaming at the mouth for the second part after that, so. We'll see.

Chapter 18: I'm A Certified Brat Tamer

Chapter Notes

> Hi all! I took a little break from the fic and turned off comments for a bit because I got overwhelmed. I've got a lot going on IRL and won't have time to reply to your lovely comments anymore. Please feel free to keep leaving them and know that I will read every one! I am very excited to present this next chapter to you, the moment you have all been waiting for... kind of.
>
> Anyway, as always, thanks so much for reading! Enjoy the chapter you rabid fanpeople.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's a coincidence. Honest to God, Tighnari had no nefarious ideas in mind when he booked this flight.

They're all flying in to LA on Thursday (except for Kaveh, who can just drive) so they can get to the con bright and early Friday morning. *By pure coincidence,* Tighnari's flight gets in first, and Cyno's is shortly after. They're *supposed* to meet down at the hotel bar Thursday night with the others. That's not how it happens, though.

Tighnari's pulse is racing as he quietly unpacks his things in the hotel room. Cyno texted that his flight landed about an hour ago. He should be here soon. Damn Alhaitham for putting them in one room together. Probably Kaveh's idea, the little shit.

(Tighnari will have to thank him later.)

There's a faint beep, and the lock clicks. Tighnari leaps up from the bed. It feels like his heart is trying to break free from his chest as he takes in Cyno in the doorway with his luggage. He's so… *beautiful.* Tighnari can hardly breathe. The moment is tense with anticipation as they stare at each other.

Cyno smiles, and it lights up his whole face. He fully enters the room and shuts the door behind him, setting his luggage down. "Hey, Nari," he says.

Without a single thought in his brain, Tighnari crosses the room, shoves Cyno up against the door, and kisses him hard. Cyno reacts in an instant, grabbing Tighnari's hips and pulling him in close. They kiss

roughly, sloppily. All Tighnari knows is the need to breathe his air, to taste Cyno on his tongue. He slips inside Cyno's mouth, and Cyno groans. He pulls their hips together, and Tighnari can tell he's already half hard. As for Tighnari, well, he's been amped up all day.

It's everything Tighnari wants from a kiss. Maybe a little intense for a first kiss, especially considering he didn't even greet Cyno first, but whatever. They've been building up to this for almost an entire year at this point. If Tighnari wants to go feral, he's going feral. Cyno doesn't seem to have any objections, so that's that.

They don't exchange a word as Cyno walks him back through the room, their mouths still connected. Tighnari stumbles, and Cyno grabs beneath his ass and hoists him up. Tighnari keens, wrapping his legs around Cyno's waist. They fall onto the bed together in a mass of flailing limbs, parting for just a moment.

"You little minx," Cyno growls.

Tighnari smirks up at him. "Fuck me," he commands.

Cyno lets out a long groan and says, "I've been waiting forever to hear you say that."

"Stop wasting time then, you fucking clown."

"I knew you'd be a brat in bed." Cyno reaches into his pocket and pulls out a bottle.

Tighnari raises an eyebrow. "You stashed lube in your pocket?"

"What can I say? I'm an optimist." He pulls at Tighnari's shirt and says, "Get naked."

He hurriedly follows the command, but he can't help snarking as he goes. "You think you can just tell me what to do, huh?"

"Yeah, I do." Cyno stands up to pull off his own clothes, throwing them aside. "You're going to do exactly what I tell you. You know why?"

Tighnari shivers. "Why?"

Cyno's hand ghosts over his throat, a gentle but threatening touch. "Because you're mine." He stares deeply into Tighnari's eyes. "Say it," he orders him.

Tighnari holds out for a couple of tense seconds. Only when Cyno's grip tightens does he say hoarsely, "I'm yours."

He watches the shudder pass through Cyno's body. It's so *hot* to see the effect Tighnari has on him. He knew it would be good when they finally got here, but damn. Cyno really is desperate for him, and Tighnari likes that. He likes it a lot. He likes that Cyno never gave up, never thought Tighnari wasn't worth the effort. He *is* worth it to Cyno. He knows that now without a doubt. *He'll never give up on me,* Tighnari thinks, and he suddenly feels choked with emotion.

Cyno notices, his hand brushing gently over Tighnari's cheek. "You okay?" he whispers.

"Mhmm," Tighnari says, nodding. "I'm just…" He looks away, a hint of pink dusting his cheeks. "Really happy to see you. That's all."

"Me too, Nari," says Cyno with a chuckle. "Me too."

Cyno spends some time just kissing him, gentler now. Tighnari wasn't quite sure what Cyno would be like in bed. He knew it would be intense—Cyno's an intense kind of guy, so it's not surprising—but they never talked about any particular kinks. Mostly because Tighnari knew if they ever actually discussed the topic it would turn into phone sex so fast. Now that they're here, Tighnari kind of wishes they'd prepared better.

As they part, Tighnari exhales softly and says, "Take me hard. We can go slow later."

His mouth pulls up into a smirk. "Later, huh?"

Tighnari reaches out and slaps his arm. "Stop fucking around and get to it already."

Cyno's eyes darken, and he says lowly, "I'm going to have to tame you, aren't I?" Tighnari shivers, and Cyno gives him a hungry look. "Fine by me. I'm a certified brat tamer. You're in for it, Nari."

Cyno suddenly pins his arms down and goes to work on Tighnari's neck. Tighnari moans as he sucks bruises over his skin. Normally he's opposed to hickies, but for Cyno? He'll wear them proudly. God, how Tighnari wants to belong to him. For real. Not just for tonight. That's a dangerous path to go down, though, so Tighnari pushes the thoughts away and focuses on the present moment.

Their hips grind together, and Tighnari lets out a desperate gasp. "Cyno," he whines, and then, more firmly, "Sometime today, if you don't mind."

"So much sass." Cyno's hands move to his hips, holding him down. "I'm going to have fun with you."

Tighnari lets out a warning growl, and Cyno just smirks. He reaches down and bites one of Tighnari's nipples with no warning, and Tighnari lets out a scream. The sweet pleasure-pain is too intense.

"God, you're perfect," Cyno groans. He finally reaches for the discarded lube, shuffling back as he slicks up his fingers. "I knew you wanted me. Just fucking attack me the second I walk in. No hello or anything. You want it *bad,* don't you?"

Tighnari scoffs and says, "Get over yourself."

Cyno's eyes flash. He reaches down beneath Tighnari, his wet fingers brushing against his hole. "What was that?"

Tighnari squirms. He looks up at Cyno, who raises a challenging eyebrow. "Get over yourself," he repeats. "You think you're special? You're just some fucking loser obsessed with games."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. The only reason we're even here is because you begged me." He chuckles. "Pathetic."

Cyno's fingers circle around his hole, massaging the muscle. "You got more, or are you done?"

Tighnari can't help a little whimper. "You're too much of a coward to fuck me. Admit it. You think this is teasing? You can't handle me, and you know it."

Cyno says nothing, their eyes locked as he continues to rub Tighnari without entering him. Tighnari holds back another whimper. He can't hold out much longer. He needs Cyno inside him. His every instinct is telling him to fight it, but *damn* does he want it.

"Is that all?" Cyno asks softly. "You think a little sass is going to scare me off, Nari?" The corners of his mouth turn up. "I know what you really want. I know what you really need. You need to be fucked until you cry."

A little noise escapes Tighnari's throat, despite his best attempts to keep it in. He looks up at Cyno desperately, saying with his eyes what he's too proud to say with his words.

"Tell me you need me," says Cyno.

"I don't," Tighnari insists.

Cyno almost, *almost* slips his finger inside. Tighnari keens and wriggles against him, but he pulls it back. Tighnari growls in frustration, panting with how desperate he is.

"I-" He forces himself to hold it back. He can't give in.

"Come on, Nari," Cyno says in a teasing tone. "You're a terrible liar, you know."

Tighnari whimpers again. He tries to shift against Cyno's fingers, but his other hand grasps Tighnari's hip to keep him still. He grunts in frustration. He's starting to feel hot from how hard he's resisting right now. The sweat beads on his forehead.

"Cyno," he whines.

"Say it," Cyno orders in such a commanding tone, Tighnari instantly has to obey.

"I need you," he whispers. "I need you inside me. Please, Cyno-"

He cries out as Cyno slips inside. Cyno's lips part as he looks down at Tighnari, drinking him in. "That's right. Just relax for me, baby. I'll take you hard if that's what you want."

"Yes, *please!"* Tighnari gasps.

"Oh, who's begging now?" Cyno starts pumping him fast. "This what you want? Huh?"

"Yes-yes-yes," Tighnari chants, meeting every thrust of Cyno's finger. "More."

"Greedy," Cyno comments, slipping another finger inside.

He stretches Tighnari ruthlessly, and Tighnari is living for every second of it. He begs and pleads, his bratty behavior completely forgotten. He doesn't even remember why he resisted in the first place, honestly. Maybe just because he wanted Cyno to push back. Cyno

always pushes back, and Tighnari loves that. He loves how relentless Cyno is, how he always comes back for more.

He feels emotional again, but he doesn't shove it down this time. He lets the tears sting his eyes. "Cyno," he whimpers. "Cyno, I need your cock. Please give it to me. Please, I'll do anything."

"Anything?" Cyno repeats. He chuckles, slipping his fingers out. "You don't need to do anything, Nari." His other hand comes up to brush Tighnari's cheek. "I've been gone for you from the start."

A few tears spill. Cyno brushes them away softly before pulling back. He slicks his cock up with lube and presses it against Tighnari's hole. Tighnari lets out a whimper.

"Please," he says one last time.

"I've got you, Nari," Cyno replies low in his throat.

He pushes inside one inch at a time, and *damn* are there a lot of inches. Cyno was not exaggerating about how big his dick is. Tighnari feels himself coming apart at the seams already, completely unravelling beneath Cyno. He tenses up, then loosens as Cyno seats himself fully. He stops there for a minute, drinking in the moment. Tighnari looks up at him to see his eyes flutter closed, lips parted and a blissful look on his face.

"You feel so good," he whispers. "I knew you'd feel good, but- damn."

Tighnari reaches up for his hands, intertwining their fingers. He feels himself smile, his eyes going soft. "Give it to me baby," he breathes. "Give me everything."

Cyno's upper lip curls. He rolls his hips experimentally, and Tighnari cries out at the simple movement. Cyno groans, muttering a soft, "Fuck," before doing it again. Then again, and again, then he's fucking Tighnari hard and fast like he just can't hold back anymore. Tighnari loves it, thrashing beneath him and crying out for more.

The power and stamina required for Cyno to keep up as long as he does is fucking *impressive.* He keeps edging Tighnari, going hard until he starts to moan in earnest and then slowing down again. It drives Tighnari absolutely wild. How can Cyno just *tell* when he's about to come and then refuse to let him?

The third time Cyno does it, Tighnari growls in his throat. "More," he

demands.

"Careful what you wish for," Cyno teases.

"I thought you were going to fuck me so hard I cried," Tighnari says, the last little bit of rebellion surging inside him. "Or are you all talk?"

Cyno chuckles darkly. "Alright," he says. "But just remember you asked for it."

He positions himself carefully, looking down at Tighnari in a tense moment of anticipation. He suddenly leans down for a soft kiss before pulling back up. Then he grins, showing his teeth. Tighnari feels a sharp pulse in his cock.

Cyno does *not* hold back. Tighnari thought he was going hard before, but he was wrong. The mattress squeaks with every thrust, thumping back against the wall. Tighnari screams as Cyno's cock pounds his hole, pushing him to his limits. It's so much more than Tighnari ever could've imagined. God, it just figures Cyno would fuck this well. Not only does he have a massive dick, he knows how to use it.

Tighnari can't do anything but moan and writhe beneath him. He does cry, too. He can't help it. It's so *rough,* and it's perfect. It's easily the best sex of his life, and it's with a guy who's funny and cute and kind of adorable and clearly head over heels for him, and it's all too much for Tighnari to handle. He sobs and does his best to hold on through it, knowing that's all he can do now.

He can feel his orgasm building. He's too out of it to even reach down and touch himself, but he doesn't need to. He comes anyway, spurting out in long stripes that decorate his chest. Cyno follows quickly after, like he was just waiting for Tighnari to go first. Tighnari pants as come fills up his hole, sticky and warm. Cyno manages to keep himself upright but he slouches noticeably, trying hard to catch his breath.

Tighnari laughs a little, completely blissed out. Every muscle twitches, tingling with pleasure. He grabs Cyno by the waist and pushes him onto his back to lie on top of him. His cock slides out, and Tighnari whines softly. They both pant with exhaustion, Tighnari rising and falling on Cyno's chest as they take deep, heavy breaths.

"God, Cyno," he whimpers. "How?"

Cyno chuckles breathlessly. "How what?"

"How do you even-?" Tighnari laughs, unable to articulate what he means. "You're- you're-"

"What? I'm what?"

"Godlike," Tighnari moans.

They both start laughing in earnest, though neither of them can breathe properly yet. They settle down after a while, lying there contentedly in each other's arms. Cyno strokes Tighnari's hair, dipping up to brush one of his ears occasionally.

"I thought I told you not to touch my ears," Tighnari grumbles.

"You're literally purring," Cyno points out.

"I'm not," he denies. He purrs more, nuzzling his face into Cyno's bare chest. Cyno chuckles and resumes stroking his fur.

"They're so soft."

Tighnari purposefully brushes his tail against Cyno's leg. He yelps as Cyno reaches down to grab it and *tug.* He pulls away to give Cyno an affronted look.

"Sorry," says Cyno, completely unapologetic. "Couldn't resist."

Tighnari's expression melts into a well-fucked grin. "I don't mind," he murmurs. "But I will retaliate." He reaches his hand back and slaps Cyno's ass hard.

Cyno grunts, a wicked look overtaking his features. He grabs Tighnari's chin and pulls him in for another kiss. Tighnari whimpers against him. He loves the taste of him, a little hint of sweetness.

He pulls back to ask, "Were you eating taffy?"

Cyno grins. "It's an old trick. Makes kisses taste good."

"You really did come prepared," Tighnari comments.

"I did," Cyno confirms, nodding. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist me."

Tighnari purses his lips together. "I'm going to tell you something embarrassing."

"Ooh, okay," says Cyno, clearly interested.

"You remember when you sent that picture of you the first time?"

Cyno cocks his head. "Yeah…?"

"I, um." Tighnari gives him a little smile. "I kind of- couldn't control my- *urges."*

The look that crosses Cyno's face is absolutely worth the hint of shame Tighnari still feels about those events. He looks both shocked and delighted beyond belief. He lets out an incredulous noise and Tighnari giggles, burying his face back in Cyno's check.

"You serious?" Cyno asks him.

"Yeah," Tighnari admits.

"You were getting off to me all the way back then?"

"Maybe."

"Oh-ho-ho," Cyno chuckles. "You know I am never, *ever* going to let you live that down, right?"

"Don't tell anyone," says Tighnari.

"Oh, I'm telling everyone."

Tighnari pulls back, slapping him on the arm. "Don't! It's a secret. For your ears only."

Cyno presses his lips together, then sighs. "Alright, alright. I won't tell." He pulls Tighnari in for another kiss. "God, I can't stop kissing you," he says against his lips.

"I don't want you to stop," Tighnari replies.

"I won't," says Cyno. "I'll never stop."

The time they're supposed to meet everyone else at the bar comes and goes. Cyno and Tighnari don't even get out of bed.

***

Kaveh knew the drive to LA would be terrible at this time of day, but sitting in traffic for *four fucking hours* would make anyone lose their

mind. He didn't have enough PTO to take off work today, so he's stuck doing this at rush hour. He should've just woken up early and made the drive tomorrow morning, but… he really wants to spend the night with Alhaitham. And it was his idea to have everyone meet at the hotel bar, anyway.

He tries not to be snippy with the front desk as he checks in, but there's a little bit of a line there as well. He forces himself to breathe deep and be calm. He's excited to see everyone. Alhaitham for obvious reasons, but the others too. Kaveh loves all his babies!

He's the first one to arrive at the bar, or at least, he thinks he is. It's not too crowded, which is expected for a Thursday night, but he does only have photos and voices to draw on for most of them. He does a couple once-overs of the bar just to make sure before grabbing a cocktail and settling into a circular booth that should be big enough to fit them all. He sips his drink as he waits. Alhaitham texts saying he's coming down in a minute. Kaveh must have just missed him in the room. It's fine, it's *fine.* He can totally wait.

Someone approaches the table. Short guy, blue hair. He's kind of cute, not really Kaveh's type, but it's not like he's available anyway. Kaveh cocks his head at him and says, "Hi there."

"Hi," the guy replies.

He looks nervous. Is he here to hit on Kaveh? That's sweet. "I'm just waiting for my boyfriend," says Kaveh, trying to let him down gently.

"I know," says the guy. "Alhaitham?"

Kaveh's brow furrows. How the fuck does this random guy know Alhaitham? And how does he know he's Kaveh's boyfriend? It takes a second for it to click. There's only one person he never got a picture of. And *holy fucking shit,* now he understands why.

"No," says Kaveh, his mouth falling open. "No-no-no. No fucking way."

Scara cringes a little, looking guilty. It's her. It's *him.* How the fuck-?

"You don't even sound like a girl!" Kaveh protests.

Scara sighs. His voice suddenly raises in pitch as he says, "I guess I should be doing the girl voice?"

"Oh God," says Kaveh. "Ohhh my fucking God."

This is insane. This is… *fuck*.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter out tomorrow ~ ♥

Chapter 19: Vodka. Shot. Two. Three? Three.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Scara's nerves are like a physical mass coiling in his stomach. This is it. This is the day Sethos finds out the secret he's been keeping since they met. This is the day Scara loses him.

He's fucking panicked just thinking about what will happen if Sethos changes his mind about leaving Utah because of Scara's lie. He promised, though. Right? Fuck, Scara should've just told him. But he couldn't risk Sethos not coming to the con at all. At least if Scara can get him here they can talk about it in person. He can convince him that this is the right move, even if he is pissed that Scara's been lying to him this whole time. Which he absolutely will be.

Dammit. There's no chance this works out, is there? Sethos is going to freak out, and it'll set back his mental health by years, and it will all be Scara's fault. Because he couldn't tell the truth. He clamps his hand over his mouth and takes a deep breath. *It'll be fine. It'll be okay.* He doesn't believe it, but he repeats the words in his brain anyway.

It was… devastating, hearing Sethos talk about his childhood. Scara knew he needed help, but he had no idea how deep the trauma went. This is so much bigger than he realized, and everything has just gotten so out of hand. How is Scara supposed to navigate this? He's terrified of fucking it up, even though he knows he already has.

Just make sure he comes home with you, Scara tells himself. That's the most important thing. He can't let Sethos go back to Utah. It's not safe there with the hold his parents have over him, plus Scara has heard numerous horror stories about how persistent the Mormons are. Sethos lives in a very concentrated area with a church on damn near every street corner. If he's going to heal from his trauma, he can't do it there.

Scara spends the whole plane ride a nervous wreck. He hasn't been able to eat anything all day, and he feels like he's about to faint. He forces himself to eat one of the snacks in the mini-fridge when he gets to the hotel, even though they're insanely expensive. Alhaitham's paying for it anyway, and he deserves a little vengeance for putting Scara and Sethos in the same room. The same *bed.* There's not even a

couch in here! God, this is going to be so awkward.

He has to hype himself up enough to go down to the bar to meet everyone by telling himself that he's only doing it to see Sethos. Because he *desperately* wants to see Sethos. He doesn't want Sethos to see him, not at all, but he knows he can't hide anymore.

He spies Kaveh alone at the booth and steps up to him. Luckily Kaveh figures it out without him having to say anything. He isn't sure he'd be able to get the words out. Kaveh finally calms down enough to usher him into the booth. Scara takes a breath and slides in.

And then Kaveh immediately asks, "Does Sethos know?"

Scara sighs and grumbles, "No."

"Ah!" Kaveh squeals. "I don't know whether to laugh or scream or… maybe slap you, I don't know. Is Sethos even into guys? Like, at all?"

"I don't know," he says tersely. "I don't think so."

Kaveh lets out a breathless chuckle. "Oh my God. Honey… Oh, this is a *mess."*

"Can we not talk about it?" Scara asks him. "I've been screaming internally since the second I woke up this morning."

Kaveh purses his lips like he's desperately trying to hold back a barrage of questions. "Okay," he says. "Okay. Um… Do you want to get a drink?"

"I doubt I could hold it down right now."

"That's fair. Um, well- *Well.*"

Despite himself, Scara smiles a little. "I've never heard you at a loss for words."

"I think this is the first time it's ever happened," Kaveh replies. He seems to calm himself down a little. "Uh… are you excited for the con?"

"Kind of hard to be excited about anything right now."

"Right, of course."

They continue their awkward conversation for a few minutes until

Alhaitham arrives. Kaveh screams and trips out of the booth, throwing himself into Alhaitham's arms. Alhaitham catches him and holds him tight. Scara gets a little ache in his chest. So happy and in love. Why can't Scara have that? Fuck, why did he do this to himself?

"Hey, baby," says Alhaitham, giving him a kiss. "You miss me?"

"Every day," Kaveh coos. He slips his hands in Alhaitham's. "I'm so happy you're here."

"Me too." Alhaitham glances over at Scara, who gives him a little wave. Alhaitham frowns and asks Kaveh, "Who is this?"

A manic grin crosses Kaveh's face. "Guess."

Alhaitham looks from Scara to Kaveh and says, "I don't get it."

"Do the voice," says Kaveh.

"No," Scara replies.

"Do the voice!"

"Eat a dick," Scara snaps. "Just tell him."

"You should be the one telling him," Kaveh says sassily. "It'll be good practice."

Scara sighs and says, "Fine. I'm Scara. Happy? You fucking asshole."

Understanding dawns in Alhaitham's eyes, then surprise. "Oh," he says softly. "I didn't know Sethos was into guys."

"He's not," Scara says tersely, his shoulders hunching.

Alhaitham looks even more surprised, and then his expression hardens. "That's kind of fucked up."

Scara's shoulders sink further. "I know," he says quietly.

"Don't be mean to him," Kaveh chides. "He's delicate right now."

"Fuck you," Scara growls.

His nerves have heightened even more. They're just confirming what he already knows: what he's done to Sethos is unforgivable. There's no coming back from this. He's going to ruin the whole night with his

stupid reveal, and no one will even want to go to the con with him, and he'll have to sit alone in the hotel room until his flight back home. Except he can't even do that, because Sethos is in the same room. *Fuck.*

Scara's phone buzzes. He checks his messages.

Sethos: Finally got here. LA is a zoo!

Scara: It kind of is
Scara: You coming down?

Sethos: Yep just dropping off my luggage real quick
Sethos: Can't wait to see you

Scara: Remember how I said I was sorry for doing this to you?

Sethos: I remember

Scara: Okay just making sure
Scara: See you soon

"Sethos is on his way," Scara reports, tucking his phone back into his pocket.

Kaveh's eyes light up. "I smell dra-ma," he singsongs. "Anyone heard from Cyno or Tighnari, by the way?"

"Nope," Alhaitham replies. "I'll ping them real quick."

Scara's heart thumps desperately. He stays silent as Alhaitham and Kaveh catch up. This is the moment of truth. It's here. Scara's not ready. It's good, though, that he's finally being forced to do this. If they never met up, Scara probably would've kept it a secret forever.

Dammit, he's such a coward. It just hurts him so much to think of breaking Sethos' heart. Which he's about to. *As long as comes home with me,* he reminds himself. All Scara has to do is make sure he's on that flight to Arizona. No matter what. He has three days.

Scara's watching the entrance like a hawk, and as soon as he sees Sethos walk in, his heart stops. Then it starts beating even wilder. Sethos' eyes meet his across the room, and his brow furrows a little. He seems to recognize Kaveh and Alhaitham, though, because he starts making his way over. Scara brings his hand to his face, trying to cover the desperate wail that threatens to escape. He can't start crying.

Whatever happens, he's not putting that onto Sethos. It'll be hard enough on him as it is. He swallows thickly, forcing the emotion back.

"Hey, guys," says Sethos in that bright, perfect voice. He gives Scara another questioning look before turning back to Alhaitham and Kaveh.

Neither of them greet him, both turning to Scara instead. Kaveh elbows him sharply. Scara glares at him, elbowing him back even harder. Kaveh gives him a pointed look, and Scara grumbles.

"Hi?" says Sethos uncertainly.

Scara looks up at him. He doesn't want to do this. He *has* to do this. He clears his throat and says, "Hey, honey."

The look on Sethos' face tells him everything he needs to know. Scara looks away and hunches his shoulders, curling in on himself. He's such a piece of shit. This is the worst moment of his entire life. Still, he can't help stealing glances at Sethos as he processes the information. A wide range of expressions cross his face. No one says anything, and Scara really wishes they would.

"Sethos!" Kaveh finally chirps. "Welcome. Uh… have a seat?"

Sethos blinks and continues to stare.

Kaveh elbows his boyfriend and says, "Get him a drink."

Alhaitham rises. He claps Sethos' shoulder before leaving the booth and heading to the bar.

"Come sit!" Kaveh insists, gesturing him into the booth.

Sethos slides mutely into the booth on the same side as Scara but doesn't get anywhere near him. He's still staring, and Scara can't take it anymore.

"You can hate me if you want," he says quietly. "I won't blame you for that. Just remember your promise."

After a moment, Sethos nods faintly. Scara is not sure he actually heard him. Kaveh starts to chatter about something even though no one is listening. Alhaitham returns with a drink for Sethos, who doesn't even ask what it is before taking a sip. His expression screws up at the taste, but he keeps drinking anyway.

"I think I need a drink, too," says Scara, and Sethos immediately slips

out of the booth to let him by.

Scara finally lets out a breath as he leans over the bar. He needs alcohol. He needs alcohol *now.*

"What can I get you?" asks the bartender.

"Vodka. Shot. Two. Three? Three."

The bartender seemed completely unfazed. Scara hands over his card to start a tab, and the shots are poured. He downs the first one quickly. Fuck, he should've gotten a chaser. No, he doesn't deserve a chaser. His knuckles turn white as he grips the next shot. He knocks it back, wincing at the burn. He can already feel it working. He slams the glass down and goes for the third, downing it before he can change his mind.

He makes his way back over to the table, sliding in and making sure he's as far away from Sethos as possible. Kaveh looks over at him. "Did you get your drink?" he asks.

"Yep," Scara replies.

The alcohol does make it a little better. Scara is able to have a conversation now, at least. Kaveh seems to take pity on him, on both of them, because he really is trying to make this feel somewhat normal. It's not, of course. Nothing about this is normal.

Sethos finishes his first drink, and Alhaitham quickly gets him another. Three shots is definitely enough for Scara for the moment, especially consider he barely ate today, and he eases into the loose feeling in his limbs. He still feels a pang every time he looks at Sethos, but it's muted. This is fine. He can do this. They'll get drunk tonight, and Scara can deal with it in the morning. Sounds like a great plan.

The alcohol gets to Sethos pretty easily, which makes sense since he's never had it before. He starts mumbling a little, and Kaveh tells him to come closer so he can hear him. That's how Scara ends up sandwiched between Sethos and Kaveh, with Sethos' thigh brushing his. He probably doesn't even notice. Is two drinks really enough to get him hammered? Damn.

Sethos and Kaveh start arguing about who's more drunk, and Scara interrupts them to say, "Okay, you're both drunk, and I'm clearly not drunk enough, so I'm going to need to get up for another drink."

"I want another one, too," says Sethos.

"That's a bad idea," Scara says instantly.

Sethos gives him a little smile, and it puts butterflies into Scara's gut. "I like bad ideas," he says.

Scara has to take a deep breath. His eyes flick down to Sethos' lips, then back up. "Move," he says, reaching out to shove his shoulder.

He eventually manhandles Sethos out of the booth. Despite Scara's insistence that he stay put, Sethos follows him over to the bar. Scara sighs and says, "You've had enough. You should take it easy."

"Nope. I want more." He smiles at Scara and says, "You're pretty."

Scara's heart leaps into his throat. He swallows it. "You don't even know what you're saying," he mumbles.

Sethos shrugs. They both order another drink, since Scara can't seem to talk him out of it. Well. He's an adult. He wants to get shit-faced, that's up to him. Scara gets them both a glass of water as well and insists that Sethos drink it. He ends up giving Sethos his, too, because Scara deserves a hangover. He *wants* to feel like shit in the morning. He *is* shit, so it fits.

"Hey," says Sethos, blinking slowly at Scara in the booth.

Scara raises an eyebrow and asks, "What do you want?"

"How come you didn't tell me?"

He sighs. "Would you have come if I told you?"

Sethos frowns and says, "I don't know."

"Exactly."

"But why didn't you tell me before then?"

Scara huffs. He gives Sethos a flat look. "You would've stopped talking to me."

"No, I wouldn't have."

"You would've stopped the phone sex."

"Probably," Sethos admits. "Is that why? 'Cause you wanted to have sex with me?"

Scara lets out a long groan. "Can we not talk about this?" he asks.

"You said you loved me," Sethos reminds him.

His heart sinks. He downs the rest of his drink and then starts shoving Sethos again. "Get out. I need another one."

"No," says Sethos stubbornly. "Answer the question."

"Fine," says Scara, shoving Kaveh instead. "You get out."

"Hey!" Kaveh protests. "Hands to yourself. I'm taken."

"I need another drink."

"I don't think any of you need another drink," says Alhaitham. "You're all wasted. We have a con tomorrow bright and early, and I will drag every one of your asses out of bed no matter how hungover you are."

"Okay, well then, it doesn't matter how hungover I am," Scara points out. He shoves Kaveh again. "Move!"

Kaveh shoves him back. "I said don't touch me!" he shrieks.

Alhaitham reaches over to break them up. "Okay, it's time to go to bed now. Everybody close out."

"I'm not done," Scara insists.

"You *are* done," says Alhaitham, and Scara shivers at the command in his voice. He can't help the way he instantly goes pliant for a Dom, even if it's someone else's Dom.

"Fine," he grumbles.

They all manage to pay their tabs and get back up to their rooms. Sethos and Scara stumble inside. Scara's not even thinking anymore as he peels his shirt off and flops into bed. He feels a thump beside him on the mattress and looks over.

"We should get under the covers," says Sethos.

Scara groans and says, "I don't fucking care." He grabs a pillow and stuffs it under his head, curling up on his side of the bed.

He feels a hand on his cheek. His eyes blink open, confused. Sethos draws his hand back, giving Scara a little frown. He flips himself over, turning away. Scara stares at him for a long moment. Eventually the drink lulls him into a fitful sleep.

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Sethos wakes up feeling like something crawled into his mouth and died. He groans as the light hits his eyes, burying his face deeper into the pillow.

"Rise and shine," says an unfamiliar voice.

Sethos frowns. He looks up, his eyes blinking open slowly. The previous night comes back to him in flashes, and his heart drops into his stomach. Scara must notice his reaction, because his expression suddenly looks pained.

"I'm going down to breakfast. You should grab a shower. We're walking over to the venue in an hour." He points to the bedside table. "Water over there. Drink it. It'll help."

"'Kay," says Sethos softly.

Scara nods and quickly leaves the room.

Sethos groans, flopping back down onto his pillow. What the *fuck?* Why is this happening to him? The girl of his dreams… is a man. An adorable man, sure, but still a man. Sethos finally understands why she- *he* insisted Sethos would hate him once they met. He really wishes he could go back to not knowing, but it's too late for that.

He keeps turning the thought over in his brain as he showers. This is so… ugh. Why didn't she tell him? He! Why didn't *he* tell him? Was it really just because he wanted to get off? His clients think he's a girl, too, right? Does everyone think Scara is a girl? Geez. That must be a hard lie to maintain all the time. So why would he do it?

The ERP thing kind of makes sense. Those guys probably wouldn't pay for ERP with a guy. So is it that he had to lie for work and he just… kept it up? Sethos groans and switches off the water. He's spent too long in here already.

The glass of water helps with his head a bit. The shower, too. He doesn't realize how much better he's faring than Scara and Kaveh until he sees them both drooped over the table in the breakfast nook.

"You did this to yourselves," Alhaitham is telling them.

"Yes, thanks for the reminder," says Scara, rolling his eyes.

Sethos stops in his tracks. Scara's eyes are so pretty. It's weird to think a guy's eyes are pretty, right? The reason he loves Scara—well, the reason he *thought* he loved Scara—has nothing to do with appearance. But for a guy, well… he's not *bad.* Sethos still wouldn't date a guy, but he's not terrible to look at.

Fuck, is Sethos trying to talk himself into this? No. That is a whole ass man. Sethos is not attracted to him because he's not attracted to men, and that's that. Of course, there was that one time in middle school… *Nope, not going there right now.*

"Morning," Sethos greets the table.

Kaveh looks up with a tired smile. "Hey, Sethos. You should get some food. We're leaving soon. Cyno and Tighnari will be down in a bit."

"They'd better hurry their asses up," Alhaitham grumbles. "And have a good explanation for why they didn't show last night."

"Oh, I think we all know the answer to that," says Kaveh.

Sethos definitely knows. At least, he hopes he knows. Those two were made for each other.

Sethos gets his food and takes a seat. He waves at his cousin when he enters with Tighnari. Cyno grins and wraps an arm around Tighnari's waist. Tighnari smacks him away, but Cyno pulls him closer and plants a kiss on his neck.

"Get away from me, you animal," Tighnari complains loudly enough that several people look over. He flushes and hurries over to their table. Cyno follows, looking smug. "Hi," Tighnari greets them.

"He-ey," says Kaveh. "What did you two get up to last night?"

"Can it, blondie," he snaps. He looks down at Kaveh's breakfast and says, "Ooh, they have Greek yogurt?"

"Yep! By the fruit."

"Hurry up," says Alhaitham, checking his watch. "I won't let you make us late."

Cyno swaggers up to the table next, looking very pleased with himself. "Hey, cousin," says Sethos. "Congratulations."

"Thank you," Cyno replies, grinning. He looks around at the table, smile dropping as his eyes land on Scara. "Where's, um…?"

Scara immediately ducks his head, and Sethos averts his eyes and rubs the back of his neck. Luckily Cyno figures it out without either one of them having to say anything. "Oh, you better be fucking kidding me."

Scara sighs and says, "No."

"Wait, do you identify as a woman?"

"No," he says again.

Cyno's nostrils flare. "Okay, you're going to have to explain that one to me."

"Later," Alhaitham insists. "Eat, or you're not getting anything."

Cyno looks pissed. He claps his hand on Sethos' shoulder before he goes, sending him a questioning look. Sethos gives him a weak smile and nods. He can see the way Scara hunches further in on himself.

Well, at least he feels bad about it. That's something, right? It doesn't seem like he was lying just to mess with Sethos or anything. So… does he love Sethos? Fuck, this is so complicated. Sethos can't handle this right now.

They all eat quickly and head over to the con. Cyno pulls him aside on the walk over there. "Hey. How you doing?"

Sethos shrugs. "I'm alright. Just… not what I was expecting, you know?"

"I don't care what fucking justification she- *he* thinks he has for this, but whatever it is, it's not enough."

"I don't think he meant to hurt me," Sethos says quietly, aware that Scara is walking just a few feet away. They both slow down, drawing further back behind the group. "I think the lie just… spiralled out of control."

"Is that what he told you?"

"No," Sethos admits. "We haven't had a chance to talk about it yet."

Cyno nods. "You want me to talk to him for you?"

"No," says Sethos, gripping his arm. "Don't. He already feels really bad about it."

"I don't care how he feels. I care how you feel."

"I'm okay," he insists. "Really."

Cyno scans his face briefly. "I don't believe you, man. But whatever. I won't talk to him if you don't want me to."

"He's our friend, Cyno. I know it's… weird, but-"

"It's fucked," Cyno corrects. "You were intimate, and he didn't tell you. That's not proper consent."

"Whoa, hang on," says Sethos, waving his hands. "I don't think we need to go there!"

"It's a violation of trust."

"He didn't *violate* me," Sethos hisses.

"Would you have done it if you knew the truth?"

"No," Sethos says slowly. "But-"

"Then you didn't consent." Cyno grumbles irritably. "I ought to beat his ass."

Sethos grabs his arm again and says, "Don't. He didn't have bad intentions."

"I don't give a damn about his intentions."

Sethos tightens his grip. "Do *not* confront him," he says firmly. "Let me handle it, okay? Promise me."

Cyno exhales sharply through his nose. After a moment, he nods. "Okay. Let me know if you change your mind."

"I'm not letting you beat him up."

"Fine. Whatever."

Sethos quickly tries to distract him. They're almost at the convention

center, and he needs to calm Cyno down. "How'd it go last night?"

His cousin's mouth lifts in a half-smile. "It was good. *Real* good."

"Don't give me the details," Sethos says quickly.

"Don't worry, I won't sully your virgin mind. But, uh… he basically attacked me as soon as I walked in the door."

"Really?" Sethos raises an eyebrow.

"I said hi, and he just came up and kissed me." Cyno laughs a little, looking positively giddy.

"Wow."

"Yeah. God bless Alhaitham and Kaveh's meddling."

Sethos cringes thinking about how he has to sleep in the same bed as Scara for two more nights. "Yeah."

Cyno's expression darkens. Sethos quickly distracts him again.

They get to the convention center. They're one of the first groups there, thanks to Alhaitham's tight schedule. They wait over two hours for the doors to open. It feels excessive to Sethos, but he's never been to a con before. He's actually pretty excited.

He's still pretty broken up about Scara. His heart feels like it's been torn in two. But hey, he's here with his friends at an anime con. Might as well try to have a good time, right?

Sethos swallows his heartache and forces a smile onto his face.

Chapter End Notes

> THE REVEAL! What do we think of the reveal, friends? The angst over the three days of this con is going to be intense. A lot of it is centered around the whole Sethoscara mess because there is a lot to get through, but I have a ton of fun stuff planned for you guys as well. The con itself is like a good half of this fic so they'll be here for a while. We're going to have a good time full of drama and sex. I'm so hype to share it with you!

Chapter 20: If RNGesus Doesn't Bless Me, Then We Hit the Trading Post

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Wait, really?" Tighnari hisses.

"Yeah," Cyno confirms under his breath.

"I thought she… *he* was just, like, a masculine woman?"

"Nope. He's a fucking liar, is what he is."

Tighnari pulls back from him, looking over at Scara. Cyno looks, too. Scara clearly knows they're talking about him, but he pretends not to notice. Cyno turns back to Tighnari, who gives him a significant look.

They drop the topic for now. Cyno is still seething a little bit. He's so happy to be with Tighnari, though. Two very strong feelings are warring inside him right now, and it's like whiplash. Tighnari takes his hands and squeezes, shooting Cyno a smile. Cyno smiles back easily, slipping into lovesick mode.

Tighnari is… God, Tighnari is *everything*. The way he just jumped Cyno the second he saw him! Even Cyno wasn't expecting that. He thought he'd at least have to put the moves on him a little. But no, Tighnari immediately shoved him up against a door and kissed the everloving shit out of him. God, it was so hot. Cyno has to stop thinking about it, or else he'll get hard again.

Cyno doesn't even know how many times they had sex last night. It depends on how long you can wait in between before it's considered a new bout. Cyno is aware of his legendary stamina, and now Tighnari is, too. The fox certainly had no complaints. Well, he had a few, but Cyno shut him up.

They haven't talked about the future yet. That's fine. Cyno's not worried. Surely now that this barrier is out of the way, Tighnari will see that Cyno is serious. And he and Scara got revenge on his ex, right? He still hasn't totally moved on, but it did seem like it helped. Cyno is pretty sure he can talk him around to continuing this arrangement after they go home. Knowing the sex is *this good* gives

him a lot of confidence. Tighnari can't run away from him now.

He doesn't seem inclined to, even though he puts on a show in front of other people. Cyno knows it's just teasing. Tighnari has finally let him in. They confessed things last night, things they've never told each other before. No one said *I love you* or anything, but… it was in that ballpark. Cyno can absolutely get him to admit it sometime in the next three days. It's pretty fucking clear from the way Nari looks at him.

It makes Cyno feel all warm and *squishy* inside. Fuck, he's never like this. He's found his person, though. He knows that much, although he kind of knew that a long time ago. It's just so clear now, and it's all out in the open. Cyno's heart is singing the Hallelujah chorus.

And then he catches sight of Scara, and his mood instantly darkens.

Fuck. He can't believe Scara would do that. She/he/whatever is not the person Cyno thought she… he… fuck. It is 'he,' right? Now Cyno can't stop thinking about the appropriate pronouns. He said he didn't identify as a woman, though, so 'he' should be safe. Should Cyno ask him? No, fuck, Cyno's not allowed to talk to him. If he talks to him it'll piss him off, and he'll be rude, and then Sethos will be upset with him.

Scara deserves it, though, honestly. God. Just fucking lying to someone like that. Cyno is sticking to his guns on this. Informed consent is the *only* consent. Sethos definitely wouldn't have gotten off with a guy if he'd known. They've talked about Sethos' sexuality before. Mostly Cyno's, and Sethos asked him plenty of questions about it, but Cyno asked him too. He's straight. He was pretty firm about that.

Cyno knows that Sethos used to have some homophobic beliefs. It wasn't really an issue when they were kids, but they lost contact right after Cyno came out in high school. Cyno's pretty sure it was related, because after that Sethos' parents refused to acknowledge his existence. They stopped flying out for visits and even cut off Cyno's dad for supporting him. So. That sucked, obviously.

When they reconnected, Cyno knew he was taking a chance. Sethos never seemed to have a problem with him, though. They got to talking again, and Sethos mentioned pretty early on that he wasn't really as Mormon as his parents, so Cyno held out hope. Sethos was the same awkward little weirdo he remembered, and it was never an issue. He asked Cyno those questions about his sexuality with an open mind, and he's never had anything bad to say about it.

Sethos is straight, though. Cyno knows that for a fact. Unless… no, he definitely would've mentioned it. Right? Granted, he didn't mention the depression thing. That was kind of a wake-up call that Cyno didn't really know his cousin as well as he thought he did. But if Sethos was going to come out to anyone, Cyno is definitely the safest person he could do that to. He would've told him. A hundred percent.

The doors finally open, and their group gets great seats for the opening ceremony. That does mean more waiting while the rest of the seats fill up, but it looks like everyone's having a good time. Tighnari has been sticking with Cyno, and it seems Kaveh and Alhaitham are tag-teaming Scara and Sethos. Kaveh chatters on about whatever-the-fuck, occasionally managing to make Scara laugh, while Alhaitham is busy explaining some complicated concept to Sethos, judging by the way he's using his hands. It makes Cyno feel a little better. He really wants to spend this time with Tighnari, but his cousin needs support, too.

"You remember the game plan after this, right?" Tighnari asks him.

"Of course," says Cyno. "JJK art panel. Browse vendors, buy shit we don't need. Meet up with the group for lunch, then hit the Genshin Q&A together. Then get as many Archon signatures as possible and maybe the game room if we have time."

"Columbina is literally my *last one,"* says Tighnari, his eyes gleaming. "And then I will have the full set!"

"Lucky."

"Fuck you, it's not luck." He exhales deeply through his nose. "It's years of dedication to this game."

"Fucking nerd. You're so cute." Cyno reaches out to tug on his tail, and Tighnari bats him away.

"Do *not* pull my tail in public!" he hisses, his cheeks flushing red.

Cyno cocks his head. "Why?" he asks with a grin. "Does it turn you on?"

"Yes," Tighnari says shortly. "So *don't."*

Cyno bites his lower lip, leaning in to say, "Think we can squeeze a quick run back to the hotel into our busy schedule?"

Tighnari leans in further to whisper-hiss, "We fucked for hours last night *and* had a quickie this morning. Keep it in your pants, you fucking animal."

"Mm," Cyno hums, leaning in for a quick kiss. "I just can't help myself."

"You are literally inhuman."

Cyno raises an eyebrow. "That's kind of funny coming from the fox hybrid."

"I'm more human than you are. Swear to God," Tighnari insists, leaning back and sitting up in his chair.

The opening ceremony is a blast. Cyno whoops loudly at every announcement, and he's not the only one. This crowd is hyped, and Cyno is living for the energy. He thrives in environments like this. Tighnari shushes him a couple times and complains that he's being obnoxious, but he's smiling the whole time he does it. It really does seem like he's happy to be here with Cyno.

Cyno loves that. He has hope, so much hope.

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Alhaitham and Kaveh are on a mission of damage control. As much as Alhaitham will deny the other guild members are their children, he does feel kind of like a parent right now. All three couples made plans for the events they wanted to attend independently, but now, one of their couples is… well. A walking disaster.

Alhaitham's a little annoyed at the thought of having to give up his day with Kaveh. It doesn't end up happening, though. He does his best to distract Sethos during the opening ceremony, not letting him and Scara sit together. He tries to talk to Sethos about it, but they really aren't that close, and Alhaitham is fucking terrible at this type of stuff anyway. He huffs. This was Kaveh's stupid plan. Hopefully he's having better luck.

After the ceremony is over, Cyno and Tighnari say their goodbyes and head off. Cyno does clap Sethos on the shoulder again, but he doesn't seem to understand the predicament the rest of them are in. Too googly-eyed for his boyfriend, no doubt. The rest of them stand around awkwardly gathering stuff from their seats.

To Alhaitham's surprise, Sethos steps up to Scara and says, "You

wanted to hit the Demon Slayer panel first, right?"

Scara looks surprised, too. "Um. Yeah, if you still want to."

Sethos nods. He turns back to Alhaitham with a weak smile and a wave and says, "Bye, guys. Have fun."

They both walk away. Kaveh takes a step toward Alhaitham, and he seems just as baffled. "Okay, then. I figured they would both want to avoid each other like the plague, but…" He holds out his hands in a shrug. "I guess we can do our own thing now."

Alhaitham sags in relief. "Good. I am very much not equipped to provide emotional support."

Kaveh snorts and says, "Aw. But you tried." He leans in for a quick peck. "Thank you, baby."

"You want to go get your pins?"

"Yes!" Kaveh exclaims. "And if RNGesus doesn't bless me, then we hit the trading post. If we have time, we can check out some vendors before meeting everybody for lunch."

"Sounds good." Alhaitham snags him around the waist and says, "Let's go."

There's no line for the pin vending machines when they get there, and Kaveh quickly goes to the vendor to buy some tokens. Before he can pull out his card, Alhaitham is handing over his and saying, "Double that, actually."

"Alhaitham!" Kaveh exclaims.

"I know you love your pins, and I love you," says Alhaitham.

Kaveh squeals and hangs onto his arm. "You spoil me too much."

"Yeah? Maybe I should start calling you Princess."

Kaveh's eyes flash. The vendor smiles at them and hands his card back. "You two are adorable," she comments.

"Thanks, we know," Kaveh chirps. He grabs his tokens and tugs Alhaitham over to the machine.

They spend every last token, throwing the capsules in Kaveh's bag and

heading over to an empty spot to open them. Kaveh sits cross-legged on the floor with his prizes. Alhaitham just can't wipe the smile off his face as he oohs and ahhs over every treasure. Kaveh's so fucking cute. The way he just has so much love for everything. God, Alhaitham is simping over him so hard right now, and he doesn't even care.

There are several duplicate pins, which is expected given the number they got. Kaveh quickly points out his favorite ones and tells Alhaitham why they're his favorites, and Alhaitham nods along as he rambles about every one. He carefully selects which ones go on his lanyard and backpack, then gathers up the duplicates and the other ones he wants to trade, and they head over to the pin trading post.

There are several collectors with books and books of pins. Kaveh spends hours looking through them and chatting with the collectors, haggling over which pins to trade. They end up late to meet everyone for lunch at the fountain, and Kaveh quickly apologizes.

"Sorry," he says, "Alhaitham saw a cosplay of Venti, and he instantly fainted. I had to peel him off the floor."

Alhaitham elbows him and says, "Shut up." He turns back to the group and says, "The real reason we're late is because Kaveh sold his soul for a Sung Jinwoo pin."

"Jinwoo is *hot,"* Kaveh insists. He lifts up his lanyard to show them. "Look, see?"

"Worth it," Tighnari says instantly.

"Absolutely," says Cyno.

"Agree," says Scara.

When Kaveh turns to Sethos, he stammers and says, "I-It's a very nice pin, Kaveh."

Scara cringes. Alhaitham eyes him critically. Maybe they should separate those two for their own good. When they split to go wait in the lines for their desired food trucks, Alhaitham spots an opportunity. He follows Cyno even though he doesn't really care for sliders and nudges him as they get into the line.

"Hey," he says, "I know you're trying to win over the love of your life, here, but can you check in on your cousin?"

Cyno gives him a weird look and says, "I don't need you to tell me to check in on my cousin."

Alhaitham holds his hands up. "Sorry. Kaveh put me on Sethos duty this morning, and I did a piss-poor job."

Cyno softens up. "Has he been with Scara all morning?"

"Yeah, they went off together. I think he's having a rough time."

"Of course he is," Cyno agrees. "I was going to pull him aside after lunch."

"Sounds good. I just want to make sure he's okay."

The other man cocks his head, then smiles. "You know what, man? I think Kaveh's been really good for you."

Alhaitham blinks and asks, "What makes you say that?"

"Look, all I know is, when we first started playing together, you wouldn't be caught dead worrying about someone else's feelings." He reaches out to clap Alhaitham on the shoulder. "You hold onto that one, you hear?"

"I plan to," says Alhaitham. "Now I'm going to go get some real food."

"Hey!" Cyno immediately protests. "Sliders are as American as it gets!"

"My point exactly," Alhaitham replies, and heads off for another truck.

It seems Cyno does have that talk with Sethos, and yet, after the Genshin panel together they all take off in the same groups as before. Alhaitham watches Sethos and Scara walk away.

"Hey," says Kaveh softly, tugging his hand. "You okay?"

Alhaitham nods and says, "Yeah. VA panel next?"

"Yes!" Kaveh exclaims, clapping his hands excitedly. "It's going to be ah-ma-zing!"

Alhaitham smiles, forgetting his worries in the face of Kaveh's excitement. "Of course it will. Let's go."

***

The first day of the con is surprisingly… normal.

The conversation between Sethos and Scara is a little stilted at first, but once they ease into it, Scara manages to forget for a moment how much Sethos hates him right now. He just has to stay away from any possible mention of anything remotely gay, including his favorite Demon Slayer ships. That is one *very* awkward blip. But it's fine. They move on.

Talking to Sethos is like it always is talking to Sethos—Scara gets animated and giggles over everything he says. Sethos is actually pretty funny when he wants to be. He's gotten past a lot of the social awkwardness he had when they first met. The reason Scara likes talking to Sethos so much is because he's a great listener, and he has an excellent memory for details. He gets all of Scara's references and tells inside jokes that remind Scara just how much he really, really loves him.

It's a shame. It's a crying shame that Scara lied to him for so long. He's such a nice guy, and Scara took advantage of that. He's still taking advantage of it because he knows Sethos doesn't really want to be here right now. He's just doing it because he feels bad, which he shouldn't. Scara deserves absolutely nothing from Sethos, not even the barest hint of affection or friendship. He completely burned that bridge with his lies.

And yet… here Sethos is offering another. How can he be so kind, so empathetic? Scara can tell he's hurting, but he pushes through it anyway. God. Sethos has been hurting for his whole life, hasn't he? He's so used to pushing through pain that he doesn't even think twice about it. He deserves so much better than Scara. All Scara can do is hope that one day he finds some cute girl who thinks the world of him.

Scara knows that will never be him. He's known that for a long time. It's okay. As long as Sethos is safe and happy, that's all that really matters.

They're standing in line to get a signature from Tomioka's voice actor after lunch when Sethos says softly, "Hey, Scara?"

"Hmm? What's up?" Scara asks him.

Sethos crosses one arm over his chest and looks away. "Can we talk about… this?"

Scara's pulse quickens. "Yeah," he says quietly. "We can talk about anything you want."

Sethos bites his lower lip. He turns back to Scara, and there's a faint sheen over his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me? I want the truth. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear, and don't lie to make it sound better."

His heart sinks. So much for a normal day. He's surprised Sethos *wants* to talk about it, honestly. Scara puts some thought into his answer. He owes it to Sethos to be fully honest about this.

"I was scared," Scara murmurs. "I didn't want to lose you."

"You wouldn't have lost me, though. I'd still be your friend no matter what."

Scara gulps, swallowing thickly. "I wanted more than that. And I knew you wouldn't anymore if you knew. So… I lied. I lied so I could get what I wanted."

He pauses, then dares to look up at Sethos. His gaze is intense, and it burns Scara up. "Did you mean it when you said you loved me?" he asks.

Scara couldn't answer that if he tried. He just nods his head.

Sethos purses his lips. "I meant it, too. At least… I thought I did."

Tears prick Scara's eyes. He doesn't let them fall. He won't make Sethos deal with him crying on top of everything else. "You loved a different version of me, a version that doesn't exist. I know you'd never love me as I am. That's why I couldn't tell you. I just… wanted you to love me back for a little while."

A choked noise escapes him. He covers his mouth, forcing the tears back as he swallows thickly. He can't do this here. He can fall apart later, when he gets home. Except… Sethos will be there, too. Fuck. Okay, so he can't fall apart at all. He'll just have to keep it together. He can do this. He knew this was coming. But *fuck,* it hurts so much.

He doesn't look at Sethos as he quietly composes himself. Once he manages to get his breathing under control he whispers, "I'm sorry. I know it's unforgivable."

"I think it's forgivable," Sethos says slowly. Scara's eyes dart up to his,

blinking wide. Sethos gives him a sad smile. "Everybody wants to be loved. I understand why you did it. Thanks for telling me."

Scara swallows again and nods. He can't look into Sethos' eyes a second longer. He takes a step away, mindlessly straightening his clothes. He hopes no one noticed how close he was to breaking down in the middle of the convention center. God, how embarrassing.

"I'm sorry," says Sethos. "I should've waited until later to ask you."

"No, it's fine," Scara insists. He searches for a topic of conversation and latches onto the first thing that occurs to him. "Did I tell you why Tomioka's my favorite?"

"Yeah, like a million times," says Sethos with a little laugh. "Why don't you tell me again?"

So Scara tells him, grateful for the olive branch. They talk about Demon Slayer until they get to the front of the line, where Scara gets his signature. He hurries to get out of the way before showing it to Sethos.

"Look how pretty! He wrote my name!"

"It's great, Scara." He smiles. It looks a little less pained now, or is that Scara's imagination? "What do you want to do next?"

"What do *you* want to do next?" Scara challenges him. "We've been doing what I want all day."

"Uh, I don't know," says Sethos, shrugging. "I kind of want to get a picture with a Hu Tao."

"Well, of course you need a picture with your Genshin waifu!" Scara says, swallowing the ridiculous lance of hurt he feels. "Let's go find one and ask."

They eventually manage to track down a Hu Tao cosplayer who's willing to take a picture with Sethos. He grins and gives a thumbs up, and she poses. Scara takes it on his phone and sends it to Sethos in Discord. Sethos thanks her profusely and tells her how great her costume is, and she giggles and calls him a sweetheart. Scara feels a hot flare of jealousy, and he shoves it down.

Sethos will never like him like that. Never. It was all a lie.

Scara manages to get through the rest of the day. It's almost time to meet up with the group back at the hotel and get ready for dinner, so they both head back. Thankfully, tomorrow's schedule has more overlap. Sethos and Scara won't be off by themselves as much, so hopefully Sethos won't ask him any more fucking questions that make him want to burst into tears.

"I feel like I need another shower after being around so many people all day," Sethos complains.

"Well, make it quick," Scara tells him. "We're due in the lobby in twenty minutes."

"Okay," says Sethos. He immediately goes to pull his shirt off over his head, tossing it on the bed.

The moment Scara sees his rock-hard abs, he lets out a whimper. He quickly covers his mouth and looks away. "Sorry," he says, muffled.

"No, I'm sorry," says Sethos. "I-I didn't think before doing that."

Scara just shakes his head, refusing to look at him. *I will not stare at Sethos' abs,* he tells himself, *I will not stare at Sethos' abs.* He'll just keep looking at the wall until he goes into the bathroom. He hears Sethos move. He's still looking away when Sethos stops in front of him. Scara looks up in surprise, dropping his hand from his mouth.

Neither of them say a word. Sethos' expression is soft as he reaches out for Scara's hand, holding it in his own. Scara's brain short-circuits. Sethos is standing in front of him, shirtless, holding his hand. Scara can't tell if he imagines the way Sethos leans forward for a second. It's only a second, and then Sethos lets go and flushes red. He quickly walks over to the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

Scara stands there in shock. *Did he just almost kiss me?* he thinks. No. No, that's crazy. He was probably going to say something embarrassing, and that's why he blushed. That's totally it. There's no way he actually…

Scara's heart beats out an unsteady rhythm in his chest. He knows he shouldn't overthink this, but he does. He overthinks it a *lot.*

Chapter End Notes

RNGesus: An amalgamation of RNG and Jesus. RNG refers to the randomness of things like stats on your gear, so it's a measure of

luck. Jesus is obviously Jesus. So if RNGesus blesses you, you get good gear, and if he doesn't, choose Satan.

Looks guys, it's the actual con now! I was originally going to write a chapter for each day and one for each night, but that's not what happened at all. Instead we got several chapters of sex and a lot of Sethoscara drama. So. Get ready for Neon Night with everyone in rave outfits! Yay!

Chapter 21: Consequences Are For Morning-Afters

Chapter Notes

I have created a playlist for Neon Night on Spotify. Each song represents a different character. I'll also list them here in case you don't have Spotify.

Scara: Lonely Together by Avicii, Rita Ora
Tighnari: Favorite Sound by Audien, Echosmith
Alhaitham: Cool by Alesso, Roy English
Sethos: Feel Good by Gryffin, ILLENIUM, Daya
Kaveh: Tie Me Down by Gryffin, Elley Duhé
Cyno: Ain't Letting You Down by Martin Garrix, Saksham, Scott Quinn

This is entirely irrelevant to the chapter to be honest, but... I had to share it with you. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first night of the con is Neon Night. Kaveh is ridiculously excited for this because *hell yes, neon.* Kaveh was made to wear hot pink, and his ass looks amazing in these shorts. Alhaitham seems to agree, judging by the way he can't keep his hands off him.

"We're going to be late," Kaveh reminds him, then moans as Alhaitham kneads his ass between strong, powerful hands.

Alhaitham's innate need to be on time for literally everything finally convinces his horny brain to stop with the wandering hands. He kisses Kaveh once, lingering before letting him go. "I'm gonna tear those off you later tonight," he growls. "With my teeth."

Kaveh whimpers. He shoots Alhaitham a sultry smile. "Looking forward to it, baby." He slaps Alhaitham's ass and says, "Let's go."

"You little slut." Alhaitham reaches out to pinch one of his cheeks as Kaveh walks over to the door, and Kaveh yelps.

"Naughty, naughty," he declares, waggling his finger.

Alhaitham smirks and follows him out. They meet everyone in the

lobby, and Kaveh squeals over all their outfits. Sethos is wearing a sleeveless hoodie that really shows off his *delicious* arms, Tighnari's in a bodysuit with a dizzying neon pattern, and Cyno has on a pair of loose pants with a matching vest that hangs open over his chest. Scara's outfit is the one that really takes the cake, though.

"Honey, that is *risque,"* Kaveh coos, snapping his wrist.

Scara smirks. The front of the romper covers most of his chest, but it hangs open at the sides, revealing his slender torso. The shorts cover his ass cheeks by *this much.* Kaveh's top—composed of nothing more than intertwined neon strings—is a little more revealing, but he almost feels threatened. *He's* supposed to be the slutty one! He giggles and links their arms together.

"You're walking at the front with me," he declares. "I want everyone to stare at us."

"They can look, but they can't touch," says Alhaitham from behind them.

Kaveh shoots him a smirk over his shoulder. "You know I'm yours, baby."

Alhaitham reaches out to give him another pinch. Kaveh squeals and slaps his hand away.

Kaveh chatters as they walk over to the convention center. He makes sure to speed up a little, glancing back behind them to make sure Sethos is safe distance away before he squeezes Scara's arm and asks, "How you doing, sweetie?"

Scara pouts a little. "Shitty," he says sullenly.

"Nooo," Kaveh coos, mirroring his pout. "I'm sorry."

"Why? It's my own fault."

"Yeah, but-" Kaveh shrugs. "You really like him, don't you?"

"Yeah," Scara admits. He groans softly. "I'm such an idiot."

"No-no-no, don't beat yourself up."

"I've literally been lying to all of you since the day we met," he points out.

"Yeah," Kaveh allows. "But I'm sure you had a good reason."

"Not really."

Kaveh cocks his head and says, "Walk me through it, and I'll tell you if you're being stupid."

Scara lets out a long sigh. "I took a break from Genshin for a few years. Long story, not important. When I came back, I thought it would be funny to play a catgirl. I don't know, they're cute."

"They are cute," Kaveh agrees. "Your catgirl is adorable."

"Yeah, you're not the only one who thinks so." He huffs. "I started getting messages from random guys. Gross messages."

Kaveh clicks his tongue. "Damn horny trolls."

"Mhmm. I ignored them at first. It was kind of eye-opening, actually, to see the kind of shit women go through online."

"Oh, yeah," Kaveh agrees. "It's insane."

"Yeah. The thing was…" He looks around before lowering his voice and saying, "It kind of turned me on."

"Ooh. What about it? Like, specifically?"

"That they thought I was a girl." He shrugs. "I don't know. Like, most of it was nasty shit, but I liked that they were giving me attention. So I started wearing sluttier outfits, and then they gave me more attention. And… some of those lewd messages were actually hot."

"Hmm," Kaveh hums. "So you got off on them disrespecting you? I get that."

"It wasn't that, necessarily," Scara clarifies. "It's just…" He cuts himself off with a frustrated little growl.

"Come on, honey," Kaveh urges him, squeezing his arm again. "You can let it out."

"I've always liked being feminine. Like, with outfits and makeup and stuff. I never took it beyond that. But like… the stuff they would say…" He's clearly struggling. He finally huffs and says, "It was sexist. I liked that they were sexist towards me, like saying I couldn't play because I was a girl and I needed them to carry me and that kind of

stuff."

Kaveh blinks. "Oh. Okay."

"I know it's fucked up," Scara complains. "It just made me feel all delicate and soft."

"It made you feel weak, and you liked that."

"Yeah."

"So… Important distinction, here." Kaveh carefully gentles his tone. *"Do* you want to be a woman? Because you can totally do that if you want to."

Scara huffs. "No. I thought that might be it at first, but it's different. It's more of a submission thing. I want a man to take care of me and tell me what to do. That's just usually associated with women, you know? I know I don't need to be a woman to have that, but it's so much *easier* when they *think* you're a woman."

"Ohhh," says Kaveh, nodding in understanding. "I'm picking up what you're putting down. When did you come out?"

"Officially? Just a few years ago. I always knew, but I didn't ever talk about it to people in my life. It was just random hookups with shitty guys on Grindr. You know how it is."

"I do." Kaveh starts putting the pieces together. "You see a role you want to fit into, and it's a role women usually take. So you have that whole fucking debate in your head about whether it makes you less of a man or not a man at all."

"Yes, that's it!" Scara exclaims, tugging on Kaveh's arm. "It was never about being a woman. It was about the way they treated me when they thought I was."

"I get it. Hundred percent. I feel like every bottom goes through that." Kaveh gives him a little smile. "You don't have to be a woman to like being submissive. You can be submissive and a guy."

Scara huffs and says, "It's harder."

"Sure, but it doesn't require you to lie about who you are," Kaveh points out, and Scara ducks his head. Kaveh sighs. "Look, honey, I understand. You didn't have bad intentions."

"I didn't," Scara says sadly.

"You just liked the way they made you feel. All soft and feminine."

"Yeah."

"You do see how that's a little… questionable, though, right?" Kaveh says gently. "To lie to people like that and then be intimate with them?"

"Yeah, but-" Scara whines. He starts dragging his feet. "I told myself it was fine because they were just nasty internet trolls soliciting women for sex online, and they deserved what they got. But then… I met Sethos, and…"

Kaveh's heart breaks for him. It really does. He completely understands the struggle with being a feminine man. People look down on you, question you, say all kinds of shit about you. Scara probably got his fair share of that, and then he had a taste of what it would be like to fit into the role you're *supposed* to fit into. So he started chasing after it, and then he got so caught up in it, he ended up hurting Sethos. That really sucks for both of them.

"Oh, honey," says Kaveh, wrapping his arm around Scara's shoulder. "It's okay. You're not stupid, and you don't have to punish yourself. You didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"I really didn't," says Scara, sounding a little choked up.

Kaveh squeezes him. "Don't ruin your makeup, sweetie."

Scara snorts, but he pulls himself together and straightens up. "You're right. I put a lot of effort into looking this good."

"You did, and you look amazing." Kaveh pats his shoulder, then takes his arm again. "You know what? We're going to have a great night together. Just put it behind you for now. Consequences are for morning-afters."

"You're right," says Scara. "It's tomorrow's problem. Tonight we're getting drunk and having fun."

"Yes!" Kaveh squeals. "Everybody's got a party demon inside them." He shoots his friend a feral grin. "Let her *out* tonight."

***

While Kaveh and Scara are having that conversation on the way to the convention center, Cyno and Sethos have one of their own.

"I promise I'm fine, Cyno," Sethos insists.

Cyno nudges him and says, "Quit saying that, you liar."

Sethos lets out a long sigh. "Look, there's nothing I can do about it right now. Okay? It can wait until after the con. I just want to have a good time with my friends."

"Alright, alright." Cyno finally lets up, and Sethos huffs in relief. Then he says, "Just one more thing real quick."

"Ugh, fine."

Cyno gives him a critical look. "You are still straight, right?"

Sethos flushes red instantly. Fuck. He just had to ask, didn't he?

The thing is, Scara looks *hot* tonight, and Sethos absolutely cannot handle that. He doesn't know what to think, what to feel, any of it. He's so confused right now. Why does he think a guy is hot? Is it just because it's Scara? Sethos does have feelings for him. Her. *Him.* Ugh, this is way too complicated.

Cyno gasps, and Sethos instantly swats him on the arm and hisses, "Shut up, shut *up!"*

"Wait-wait-wait, for real?" Cyno asks him.

Sethos continues to swat him. "No, no, no!" he declares. "I am not into guys. I'm not."

"Dude, you went bright fucking red as soon as I asked. Are you sure?"

"No," Sethos admits. "But now is *not the time,* Cyno."

"Hang on, hang on," says Cyno, slowing them down even more to make sure this conversation is completely private. Tighnari and Alhaitham walk ahead of them, chatting. Cyno lowers his voice. "Have you seriously thought about this before? Like, your sexuality and stuff?"

"I actively try *not* to think about it."

Cyno's eyes widen. "Dude. Okay. Don't you worry, man, I've got this."

"Do you?" Sethos asks. "'Cause I don't."

"No-no, trust me." He seems to calm himself down, taking a breath. "Okay. Tell me about the first time the thought occurred to you."

Sethos blushes harder and says, "I don't want to."

"Come on, man," Cyno insists. "I know there was a first time. There always is. And I know you remember it with perfect clarity."

"I do," Sethos admits with a sigh. "I… Look, I'm not the one who started it. Okay? I did not initiate anything."

"Tell me."

He sighs again. "There was this boy in eighth grade. His name was Razor."

"His name was *Razor?"* Cyno repeats.

"Yeah, I don't know, that was his name." Sethos huffs, clenching his fists to try to make himself say it. He's been forced to tell this story before, and it was not fun. Cyno isn't going to lock him in his room for it, though. He calmly reminds himself of this, doing his best to breathe steadily.

"Okay, sorry, go ahead," says Cyno.

Sethos takes one deep, long breath and starts, "He was the weird kid at school. He had no friends, but he was really nice. Just a little… feral."

"Feral how?"

"Like, he didn't know how to interact with people. He talked all funny. He said he was raised by wolves? I have no idea if that was actually true or if he was just… crazy."

"Okay," says Cyno, gesturing for him to go on.

"Anyway. He always sat alone at lunch. I thought he looked really lonely, so I sat next to him one day." He huffed. "I didn't like sitting with the kids from church. There was one guy who always made fun of me for my acne. I hated that guy. So I just… sat down next to Razor one day, and we started talking."

Cyno nods, still listening. Sethos sighs.

"We became friends. He was really sweet. I remember one time he asked me if I wanted to 'hunt' the kid that picked on me. I said no, for the record. But anyway. The point is, we got close. My parents didn't like it 'cause he wasn't a member of the church, but they couldn't openly disapprove. Mormons always have to pretend to be nice even when they're not."

"Yeah, you've told me that before," says Cyno. "So… did you have a crush on him?"

Sethos' heart flutters in his chest. "I don't know," he says quietly. "I always go back and forth on it. I was thirteen. Who knows?"

"Hmm. So what happened?"

"We… were sitting in the hallway at lunch." Sethos closes his eyes briefly, taking a breath. This is not like the other times he told this story. No one is going to punish him. "We were talking about an English assignment and then, completely out of nowhere, he asked if he could kiss me."

Cyno nods and asks, "What did you say?"

Sethos brain is screaming at him right now. He tries to quiet it. "I didn't say anything," he admits softly. "I just… nodded."

Cyno is quiet for a couple breaths. "So he kissed you."

"Yeah." Sethos exhales sharply. "It was stupid. We were in the middle of the hallway. Someone saw us, and it got back to my parents. They freaked out and locked me in my room and told the bishop, and I had to confess my sins in front of a panel of elders."

"Shiiit," says Cyno, long and drawn-out.

"Yeah, it was awful," Sethos sighs. Strangely it feels… good, to release this. He's been holding onto it for so long. Relief sags his shoulders, and Sethos breathes heavily.

"So that was it? A boy kissed you, and they lost their shit?"

Sethos huffs. "You don't understand. It was a huge deal. Everyone knew about it. We literally had to move because of the bullying, and I never saw him again."

"Dude." Cyno blinks for a moment, then shakes his head. "Okay, so no

wonder you're all fucked up about it." He reaches out to clap Sethos on the shoulder. "Why didn't you tell me, bro? We've talked about my sexuality before."

"This is literally the first time I've told anyone without getting punished for it."

Cyno stops walking, and Sethos halts beside him. "Damn. Come here," says Cyno, pulling him into a warm hug.

Sethos goes, letting himself be comforted. He really likes hugs, and Cyno always gives the best ones. God, it's been so long since he's had any kind of physical affection. He starts to tear up a little, clutching at Cyno's vest.

"It's okay, man," says Cyno, rubbing his back. "No one's gonna punish you for this ever again. I swear."

Sethos fights the tears back, rubbing his eyes as he pulls away. The look on Cyno's face is soft and sad.

"Thanks for telling me," he says.

"Yeah," Sethos mumbles.

Cyno nods once, throwing an arm around his shoulder. They start walking again. "So were there any other incidents, or just that?"

"No other incidents, no," Sethos confirms. "I went to a Mormon high school and a Mormon college. Ninety percentage of the population in my city is Mormon. We very much do *not* talk about gay stuff, much less go around kissing people willy-nilly. Razor was just different."

"So you've never confronted it."

"No," Sethos admits. "I buried that shit deep."

Cyno looks over at him and says, "You bury a lot of shit, don't you?"

Sethos cringes thinking about how he still hasn't told Cyno about the abuse. They definitely need to have that conversation at some point. Sethos would like to do it in person so he can have one of Cyno's bear hugs after, but he doesn't know how to ask for that. He doesn't want to weigh the con down with that type of shit. At same time, though, now that he's acknowledged the horror of what happened to him, he could really use some fucking comfort.

"Can we talk?" Sethos asks him before he can lose the nerve. "Just at some point before we go home. Somewhere private."

"You got something you need to tell me?"

Sethos swallows the emotion in his throat, saying hoarsely, "Yeah. It's going to upset you."

"Upset me?" Cyno repeats with a frown.

Sethos sighs. "Not right now, okay?" He sees the others waiting ahead of them, no doubt noticing how far Cyno and Sethos have lagged behind. He takes a deep breath and says, "Let's just have a good time tonight. Okay? I've never been to a party like this, y'know."

Cyno half-smiles. He still looks concerned, but he nods. "You're gonna have a great time, buddy. I'll make sure of it."

***

Thank God for Kaveh, honestly.

His energy is infectious. He gets super obnoxious when he starts drinking, and Scara is right there beside him. They spent most of the night as a group, with Kaveh grinding against Alhaitham, and Cyno and Tighnari getting absolutely raunchy. Scara does feel a little pang at the distance between him and Sethos, but… honestly, this whole thing's not going as badly as he thought it would. At least Sethos is still talking to him. Scara will take that as a win.

Scara gets wild on the dance floor. He loves raves for this reason, because he can just hand himself over to the music and *feel.* He dances with a few different guys under the blacklights (and a couple girls who scream about his outfit), and it makes him feel good. It makes him feel alive.

They do more than dance, of course. There's a lot of stuff packed inside the convention center tonight. The entire venue pulses with light and sound, and it's overwhelming in the best way. There are a bunch of little events and games. Tighnari absolutely trashes everyone at DDR while Cyno gets very involved in a Street Fighter tournament. Eventually the other four break off because it's clear those two will not be pulled away from their games for the rest of the night. Then Kaveh drags Alhaitham over to some kind of glowing swordfight, and just like that, Scara is left alone with Sethos.

There's enough alcohol in his system by this point that he barely feels the awkwardness. He just grabs Sethos' hand and says, "Come on. Dance with me."

Sethos laughs and lets Scara drag him over to a nearby DJ booth. Sethos still makes sure they're a foot apart at all times, which does sting a little. Scara doesn't let it get to him, though. Nothing feels too complicated right now, and that's nice. He just moves his body and relishes in the feeling.

His eyes connect with another guy's across the dance floor. He's in a mesh shirt that reveals a very chiseled torso. Scara smirks and gives him a come-hither look. It's not long before the guy makes his way over.

"Hey," Scara pants, draping himself all over the stranger's sexy body.

"Hi," he returns, his hands instantly finding Scara's hips.

They dance for a couple songs in a row. He's got *moves,* and Scara is having a great time. The DJ announces one last song, and Scara grins and leans in to say in his ear, "Show me what you've got. Don't hold back."

The stranger's eyes flash, and a wicked smirk crosses his face. Scara feels hot all over.

Suddenly Sethos is there, grabbing Scara's arm and pulling him away. "I'll take the last dance," he says.

The stranger scoffs. "The fuck, man?"

"Back off," Sethos growls. "He's *mine."*

Scara feels a hot jolt of arousal at the possessiveness in his tone. The guy rolls his eyes and leaves, evidently not willing to get into a fight over it. Scara's eyes connect with Sethos' bright green. His pupils are dark, his grip tight around Scara's hips. Scara is entranced by him, lips parting as he moves to the beat.

They exchange no words. Sethos pulls Scara against him, and they dance. Scara is absolutely breathless, overheated from the dancing and Sethos' proximity. Scara moves with him, their bodies completely fluid. It feels so good. They dance in sync, their eyes never leaving each other. Scara is caught up in the moment, and he never wants it to end.

Without warning Sethos' hips surge forward, and Scara lets out a gasp at the feeling of their hard lengths brushing together. Sethos is… aroused. By *him.* Or is it just because they're so close? Scara shuts off his brain in an instant, mindlessly chasing the friction. It feels so good. Sethos suddenly dips his head and bites Scara's neck *hard.* Scara lets out a desperate whine and rolls his hips.

And then the song ends. Sethos lifts his head, taking a step back. He seems to be coming down from whatever feeling took him over when he grabbed Scara for that dance. Scara pants at him with confusion and need. What is this? Why would Sethos-? He was definitely as turned on as Scara was, there. Sethos looks away, straightening his pants.

"I'm… gonna go find Cyno," he mumbles, hurrying away.

Scara watches him go, frozen with his mouth agape. *What the fuck was that?* He manages to shake himself and quickly goes for more alcohol because it's the only thing he can think to do right now. Did Sethos really just grind on him and then run away? Scara can't handle that. He can't handle it at all. So he drinks, and he makes his back way over the swordfighters.

The rest of the night is a little bit of a blur, honestly. He remembers leaning on Alhaitham and stumbling back to the hotel. At some point he pukes into a trash can. Not his finest moment.

He wakes the next morning in Sethos' arms, somehow. Sethos pulls away the instant he wakes up and spends most of the morning hiding in the bathroom. The dance sticks out in Scara's mind, but it doesn't make any more sense in the daylight. He eventually knocks on the bathroom door to ask if he can shower, and Sethos slips out without looking at him.

They eat breakfast without acknowledging each other and come back up to the room to get dressed in their cosplays. Sethos changes in the main room while Scara takes the bathroom. When he comes out and their eyes land on each other, both of them stare for a long moment, far too long to be innocent. Eventually Sethos coughs, and they head out to the lobby still without having exchanged a single word.

Thoughts are swirling in Scara's brain. *Why did he dance with me, why did he choose that cosplay, did he really try to kiss me yesterday or is all of this just a fantasy in my head?* Maybe it's crazy to hope. It probably is, but… Scara does. He can't help it.

Chapter End Notes

Apparently I ship Sethos/Razor now. I really wanted to keep all the IRL characters to just the Sumeru cast, but then I was over here thinking who can be Sethos' first gay experience and my brain just went "Razor. It's gonna be Razor." I have no further explanation for you. But also, you can't tell me they wouldn't be super cute together.

Yes, everyone is cosplaying for the next day of the con. But we do have two chapters of pure smut to get through before then, and I'm not spoiling the surprise. I will tell you Tighnari's is the best, though.

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